

NEW WORLDS SF

2/6

New Stories By Outstanding Authors

Beginning

J G BALLARD'S

EQUINOX



ALSO: ALDISS - BRUNNER - BAYLEY - ETC
Features 'William Burroughs 20th Century
Myth Maker'

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EDITED BY
MICHAEL
MOORCOCK

NEW WORLDS

SF

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Editorial

A NEW LITERATURE FOR THE SPACE AGE

IN A RECENT BBC broadcast, William Burroughs, controversial American author of *Dead Fingers Talk**, said something like this: 'If writers are to describe the advanced techniques of the Space Age, they must invent writing techniques equally as advanced in order properly to deal with them.'

Burroughs's own writing techniques are as exciting—and as relevant to our present situation—as the latest discovery in nuclear physics. His techniques are science fiction in themselves, and many of the subjects which he treats, the terms and images that he uses, are immediately familiar to the SF reader. His anti-Utopian states where citizens are controlled by fantastic brain-washing methods, his references to Terminal Police, the City of Interzone, Ministry of Mental Hygiene etc., the last lines of *The Ticket That Exploded* (Olympia Press): 'Mountain wind of Saturn in the morning sky—From the death trauma weary goodbye then', the title of his forthcoming book *Novia Express*, all give some idea of his work's affinity with the SF of such varied writers as George Orwell, A. E. van Vogt and J. G. Ballard. And in a sense his work is the SF we've all been waiting for—it is highly readable, combines satire with splendid imagery, discusses the philosophy of science, has insight into human experience, uses advanced and effective literary techniques, and so on.

Many who have been crying out for a novel which combines all this won't accept Burroughs. They are disturbed, maybe, by his description of sexual aberration and drug addiction, the frequent use of obscenities in the text, are not prepared to read his books from a different viewpoint than that from which they read most other fiction. He is condemned for being obscure.

Burroughs has often stated that it is the job of the writer *not* to be obscure and, indeed, he is rarely obscure;

* *Reviewed in this issue.*

his work abounds with explicit notes which tell the reader exactly what he is doing and why. Apart from this, his comic writing is equalled only by Joseph Heller's in *Catch-22*. His images are stimulating and thought-provoking. The desperate and cynical mood of his work mirrors exactly the mood of our ad-saturated, Bomb-dominated, power-corrupted times.

If you like, he is the first SF writer to explore all the form's potentialities and develop a new mythology—a new literature for the Space Age. Certain British writers are going in the same direction, producing a kind of SF which is unconventional in every sense and which must soon be recognised as an important revitalisation of the literary mainstream. More and more people are turning away from the fast-stagnating pool of the conventional novel—and they are turning to science fiction (or speculative fantasy). This is a sign, among others, that a *popular* literary renaissance is around the corner. Together, we can accelerate that renaissance.

THIS IS NOT to say that we don't appreciate the entertainment value of SF—you'll find, we hope, a great many entertaining ideas and stories in this and future issues. The SF reader is an intelligent reader, dissatisfied, perhaps, with other forms of literary entertainment, who looks to SF for something more relevant to his own life and times. Also he wants variety of ideas, style, mood and plot. We intend to keep the contents of NEW WORLDS both varied and stimulating.

JOHN CARNELL, WHO edited NEW WORLDS and SCIENCE FANTASY since their start, is a man who has done most for British SF since the war. He has been responsible for discovering and encouraging many of our most popular modern SF writers. He is a man whom many people, including myself, respect and admire. Of late, the demands on his time have been almost overwhelming and it was with great regret that he decided his other commitments in the field would not allow him to continue as editor. I wish him the very best of success with his new ventures, and look forward to seeing the first issue of *New Writing* in SF which he is now editing.

—Michael Moorcock

J. G. Ballard has been called 'a poet of inner space'. He is probably the most praised SF writer of today. The critics have described him as one of the best young writers in any field and his last novel *The Drowned World* was very successful here and in the U.S. In this new story he enlarges upon and enriches that strange world which is unlike any other in fiction — the world of Ballard-land . . .

EQUINOX

by J G Ballard

Part One of Two Parts

o n e

ABOVE ALL, THE darkness of the river was what impressed Dr Sanders as he looked out for the first time across the open mouth of the Matarre estuary. After many delays, the small passenger steamer was at last approaching the line of jetties, but although it was 10 o'clock the surface of the water was still grey and sluggish, leaching away the sombre tinctures of the collapsing vegetation along the banks.

At intervals, when the sky was overcast, the water would seem almost black, like some putrescent dye. By contrast, the straggle of warehouses and small hotels that constituted Port Matarre would gleam across the dark swells with a spectral brightness, as if lit less by solar light than by some interior lantern, like the pavilions of

an abandoned necropolis built out on a series of piers from the edges of the jungle.

This pervading auroral gloom, broken by sudden inward shifts of light, Dr Sanders had noticed during his long wait at the rail of the passenger deck. For two hours the steamer had sat out in the centre of the estuary, now and then blowing its whistle at the shore in a half-hearted way; but for the vague sense of uncertainty induced by the darkness over the river the few passengers would have been driven mad with annoyance. Apart from a French military landing craft there seemed to be no other vessels of any size berthed along the jetties. As he watched the shore, Dr Sanders was almost certain that the steamer was being deliberately held off, though the reason was hard to see. The steamer was the regular packet-boat from Libreville, with its weekly cargo of mail, brandy, automobile spare parts and the like, not to be postponed for more than a moment by anything less than an outbreak of the plague.

Politically, this isolated corner of the Cameroun was still recovering from an abortive coup ten years earlier, when a handful of rebels had seized the emerald and diamond mines at Mont Royale, fifty miles up the Matarre River. Despite the presence of the landing craft, from which a jeep was at that moment being unloaded, life in the nondescript port at the river-mouth seemed entirely normal. People wandered along the wharfs and through the arcades in the main street, and a few outriggers loaded with jars of crude palm-oil drifted past on the dark water towards the market to the west of the port.

Nevertheless, the sense of unease persisted. Puzzled by the dim light, Dr Sanders turned his attention to the in-shore areas, following the river as it made a slow clockwise turn to the south-east. Here and there a break in the forest canopy marked the progress of a road, but otherwise the jungle stretched in a flat olive-green mantle towards the inland hills. Usually the forest roof would have been bleached to a pallid yellow by the sun, but even five miles inland Dr Sanders could see the dark green arbours towering into the dull air like immense

cypresses, sombre and motionless, but at the same time lit by faint gleams of light.

Someone drummed impatiently at the rail, sending a stir down its length, and the half a dozen passengers on either side of Dr Sanders shuffled and muttered to one another, glancing up at the wheel-house, where the captain gazed absently at the jetty, apparently unperturbed by the delay.

Dr Sanders turned to Father Balthus, who was standing a few feet away on his left. 'The light—have you noticed it? Is there an eclipse expected?'

The priest was smoking steadily, his long fingers drawing the cigarette half an inch from his mouth after each inhalation. Like Sanders he was gazing, not at the harbour, but at the forest slopes far inland. In the dull light his thin scholar's face seemed tired and fleshless. During the three-day journey from Libreville he had kept to himself, evidently distracted by some private matter, and only began to converse with his table companion when he learned of Dr Sanders' post at the Fort Isabelle leproserie. Sanders gathered that he was returning to his parish at Mont Royale after a month's sabbatical, but there seemed something a little too plausible about this explanation, which he repeated several times in the same automatic phrasing, unlike his usual hesitant stutter—but the doctor was aware of the dangers of imputing his own ambiguous motives for coming to Port Matarre to those around him.

Even so, at first Dr Sanders had suspected that Balthus might not be a priest at all. The self-immersed eyes and pale neurasthenic hands bore all the signatures of the imposter, perhaps an expelled novice still hoping to find some kind of salvation within a borrowed soutane. However, Father Balthus was entirely genuine, whatever that term meant and whatever its limits. The first officer, the steward and several of the passengers recognised him, complimented him on his return and generally seemed to accept his isolated manner.

'An eclipse?' Father Balthus flicked his cigarette stub into the dark water below. The steamer was now over-running its own wake, and the veins of foam sank

down through the deeps like threads of luminous spittle. 'I think not, doctor. Surely the maximum duration would be eight minutes?' As an afterthought, to reassure Sanders, he added: 'The light at Port Matarre is always like this, very heavy and penumbral—do you know Bocklin's painting, "Island of the Dead", where the cypresses stand guard above a cliff pierced by a hypogeum, while a storm hovers over the silent sea? It's in the Kunstmuseum in my native Basel—' He broke off as the steamer's engines drummed into life. 'We're moving. At last.'

'Thank God for that. You should have warned me, Balthus.'

He took his cigarette case from his pocket, but the priest had already palmed a fresh cigarette into his cupped hand with the deftness of a conjurer. He pointed with it to the jetty, where a substantial reception committee of gendarmerie and customs officials was waiting for the steamer. 'Now what nonsense is this?'

The other passengers had left the rail and gone below for their baggage. Excusing himself, Dr Sanders began to make his way down to his cabin. As he reached the companionway behind the funnel-house he could see down into the after-deck, where the steerage passengers were pulling together their bundles and cheap suitcases. In the centre of the deck, partly swathed in a canvass awning, was a large red and yellow-hulled speedboat, part of the cargo consignment for Port Matarre.

Taking his ease on the wide bench seat behind the steering helm, one arm resting on the raked glass and chromium windshield, was a small, slimly built man of about forty, wearing a white tropical suit that emphasised the rim of dark beard which framed his face. His black hair was brushed down over his bony forehead, and with his small eyes gave him a taut watchful appearance. This man, Ventress—his name was about all Dr Sanders had managed to learn about him—was the doctor's cabin-mate. During the journey from Libreville he had roamed about the steamer like an impatient tiger, arguing with the steerage passengers and crew, his moods switching from a kind of ironic humour to sullen dis-

interest, when he would sit alone in the cabin, gazing out through the porthole at the small disc of empty sky.

Dr Sanders had made one or two attempts to talk to him, but most of the time Ventress ignored him, keeping to himself whatever reasons he had for coming to Port Matarre. However, the doctor was well inured by now to being avoided by those around him. Shortly before they debarked, a slight contretemps, more embarrassing to his fellow passengers than to himself, had arisen over the choice of a cabin-mate for Dr Sanders. His fame having preceded him (what was fame to the world at large still remained notoriety on the personal level, and no doubt the reverse was true), no-one could be found to share a cabin with the assistant-director of the Fort Isabelle leper hospital.

At this point Ventress had stepped forward. Knocking on Dr Sanders' door, suitcase in hand, he had nodded at the doctor and asked simply:

'Is it contagious?'

After a pause to examine this white-suited figure with his bearded skull-like face—something about him reminded Sanders that the world was not without those who, for their own private reasons, wished to *catch* the disease—Dr Sanders said: 'The disease is contagious as you ask, yes, but years of exposure and contact are necessary for its transmission. The period of incubation may be twenty or thirty years.'

'Like death. Good.' With a gleam of a smile, Ventress stepped into the cabin. He extended a bony hand, and clasped Sanders' firmly. 'What our timorous fellow passengers fail to realise, doctor, is that outside your colony there is merely another larger one.'

t w o

LATER, AS HE looked down at Ventress lounging in the speed-boat on the after-deck. Dr Sanders pondered on this cryptic introduction. He had seen little of Ventress during the voyage up-coast, but one evening in the cabin, searching through the wrong suitcase in the dark, he had

felt the butt of a heavy calibre automatic pistol wrapped in the harness of a shoulder holster. The presence of this weapon had immediately resolved some of the enigmas that surrounded Ventress's small brittle figure.

'Doctor . . . ' Ventress called up to him, waving one hand lightly, as if reminding the doctor that he was day-dreaming. The steerage passengers milled around the speed-boat, but Ventress seemed uninterested in them, or in the approaching jetty with its waiting throng of customs and police. Instead, he was looking out across the deserted starboard rail into the dark mouth of the river, and at the distant forest stretching away into the haze.

Leaving him, Dr Sanders hurried down the companionway to his cabin. The three suitcases, Ventress's expensive one in polished alligator hide, and his own scuffed workaday bags, were already packed and waiting beside the door. Sanders straightened his suit, and then bathed his hands in the wash-basin, drying them lightly in the hope that the scent might make him seem less of a pariah to the examining officials.

The steamer was now barely twenty feet from the jetty, and through the porthole he could see the khaki-clad legs of the reception party. From his pocket Dr Sanders took out a well-thumbed envelope, and drew from it a letter written in pale blue ink that had almost penetrated the soft tissue. Both envelope and letter were franked with a censor's stamp, and panels which he assumed contained the address had been cut out.

As the steamer bumped against the jetty, Dr Sanders read through the letter for the last time on board.

April 24, Thursday.

My dear Edward!

At last we are here. The forest is the most beautiful in Africa, a house of jewels. I can barely find words to describe our wonder each morning as we look out across the slopes, still half-hidden by the mist but glistening like St. Sophia, each bough like a jewelled semi-dome. Indeed, Max says I am becoming excessively Byzantine—I wear my hair to my waist even at the clinic, and effect a melancholy expression,

although in fact for the first time in many years my heart sings! Both of us wish you were here. The clinic is small, with about twenty patients. Fortunately the people of these forest slopes move through life with a kind of dream-like patience, and regard our work for them as more social than therapeutic. They walk through the dark forest with crowns of light on their heads.

Max sends his best wishes to you, as I do. We remember you often.

The light touches everything with diamonds and sapphires.

My love, Suzanne.

As the metals heels of the boarding party rang out across the deck over his head, Dr Sanders read again the last line of the letter. But for the unofficial but firm assurances he had been given by the prefecture in Libreville he would not have believed that Suzanne Clair and her husband had come to Port Matarre, so unlike the dark and sombre light of the river and jungle were her descriptions of the forest near the clinic. Their exact whereabouts no-one had been able to tell him, nor for that matter why a sudden censorship should have been imposed on mail leaving the province. When he became too persistent he was reminded that the correspondence of people under a criminal charge was liable to censorship, but as far as Suzanne and Max Clair were concerned the suggestion was grotesque.

Thinking of the small, intelligent microbiologist and his wife, tall and pale-haired, with her high forehead and calm eyes, Dr Sanders remembered their sudden departure from Fort Isabelle three months earlier. At first he assumed Suzanne and Max had decided that this was the only solution to their personal and emotional impasse, but on second thoughts Sanders realised he had rather flattered himself, notwithstanding the degree of his own involvement with Suzanne, and that a far more sinister explanation was at hand. When Suzanne's letter arrived with its strange ecstatic vision of the forest—in maculo-anaesthetic leprosy there was an involvement of nervous tissue—he had decided to follow them.

Foregoing his enquiries about the censored letter, in order not to warn Suzanne of his arrival, he took a month's leave from the hospital and set off for Port Matarre. From Suzanne's description of the forest slopes he guessed the clinic to be somewhere near Mont Royale, possibly attached to one of the French-owned mining settlements, with their over-zealous security men.

However, the activity on the jetty outside—there were half a dozen local soldiers moving about near a parked staff car—indicated that something more was afoot.

As he began to fold Suzanne's letter, smoothing the petal-like tissue, the cabin door opened sharply jarring his elbow. With an apology Ventress stepped in, nodding to Sanders. 'I beg your pardon, doctor. My bag. The customs people are here,' he added.

Annoyed to be caught reading the letter again by Ventress, Dr Sanders stuffed envelop and letter into his pocket. For once Ventress appeared not to notice this; his hand rested on the handle of his suitcase, one ear cocked to listen to the sounds from the deck above. No doubt he was wondering what to do with the pistol. A thorough baggage search was the last thing any of them had expected.

Deciding to leave him alone so that he could slip the weapon through the porthole, Dr Sanders picked up his two suitcases.

'Well, goodbye, doctor.' Ventress was smiling, his face even more skull-like behind the beard. He held the door open. 'It's been very interesting, a great pleasure to share a cabin with you.'

Dr Sanders nodded dourly. 'And perhaps something of a challenge too, M Ventress? I hope all your victories come as easily.'

'Touché, doctor!' Ventress saluted him with a laugh, then waved as Sanders made his way down the corridor. 'But I gladly leave you with the last laugh—like the old man with the scythe, eh?'

Without looking back, Dr Sanders climbed the companionway to the saloon. The other passengers were sitting in the chairs by the bar, Father Balthus among them, as a prolonged harrangue took place between the

first officer, two customs officials and a police sergeant. They were consulting the passenger list, scrutinising everyone in turn as if searching for some missing passenger. As Dr Sanders lowered his two bags to the floor he caught the phrase: 'No journalists allowed . . .,' and then one of the customs men beckoned him over.

'Dr Sanders?' he asked, putting a particular emphasis into the name as if he half-hoped it might be an alias. 'From Libreville University . . . the Physics Department . . . ? May I see your papers?'

Dr Sanders pulled out his passport. 'My name is Sanders, of the Fort Isabelle leproserie.'

After apologising for their mistake, the customs men glanced at each other and then cleared Dr Sanders, chalking up his suitcases without bothering to open them. A few moments later he walked down the gangway. On the jetty the native soldiers lounged around the staff car. The rear seat remained vacant, presumably for the missing physicist from Libreville University.

As he handed his suitcases to a porter with 'Hotel de Europe' stencilled across his peaked cap, Dr Sanders noticed that a far more thorough inspection was being made of the baggage of those leaving Port Matarre. A group of thirty to forty steerage passengers were herded together at the far end of the jetty, and the police and customs men were searching them one by one.

By contrast with all this activity, the town was half-deserted. The arcades on either side of the main street were empty, and the windows of the Hotel Europe hung listlessly in the dark air. Here, in the centre of the town, the faded white facades made the sombre light of the jungle seem even more pervasive. Looking back at the river, as it turned like an immense snake into the forest, Dr Sanders felt that it had sucked away all but a bare residue of life.

As he followed the porter up the steps into the hotel he saw the black-robed figure of Father Balthus cross the street and disappear through the arcades.

'What's going on here?' Dr Sanders asked the porter as an army lorry reversed down a side road. 'Has someone found a new diamond field?'

The explanation seemed to make sense of the censorship and the customs search, but something about the porter's studied shrug made him doubt it. Besides the references in Suzanne's letter to diamonds and sapphires would have been construed by the censor as an open invitation to join in the harvest.

The clerk at the reception desk was equally evasive. To Sanders's annoyance the clerk insisted on showing him the weekly tariff, despite his assurances that he would be setting off for Mont Royale the following day.

'Doctor, you understand there is no boat, the service has been suspended. It will be cheaper for you if I charge you by the weekly tariff. But as you wish.'

'All right.' Dr Sanders signed the register. As a precaution he gave as his address the University at Libreville. He had lectured several times at the medical school, and mail would be forwarded from there to Isabelle. The confusion might be useful at a later date.

'What about the railway?' he asked the clerk. 'Or the bus service? There must be some transport to Mont Royale.'

'There's no railway—diamonds, you know, doctor, not difficult to transport. Perhaps you can make enquiries about the bus.'

Dr Sanders studied the man's thin, olive-skinned face. His liquid eyes roved around the doctor's suitcases and then out through the arcade to the forest canopy overtopping the roofs across the street. He seemed to be waiting for something to appear.

Dr Sanders put away his pen. 'Tell me, why is it so dark in Port Matarre? It's not overcast, and yet one can hardly see the sun.'

The clerk shook his head. 'It's not dark, doctor, it's the leaves. They're taking minerals from the ground, it makes everything look dark all the time.'

This notion seemed to contain an element of truth. From the windows of his room overlooking the arcades Dr Sanders gazed out at the forest. The huge trees surrounded the port as if trying to crowd it back into the river. In the street the shadows were of the usual density, following at the heels of the few people who

ventured out through the arcades, but the forest was without contrast of any kind. The leaves exposed to the sunlight were as dark as those below, almost as if the entire forest were draining all light from the sun in the same way that the river had emptied the town of its life and movement. The blackness of the canopy, the dark olive hues of the flat leaves, gave the forest a sombre heaviness emphasised by the motes of light that flickered within its aerial galleries.

Preoccupied, Dr Sanders almost failed to hear the knock on his door. He opened it to find Ventress standing in the corridor. For a moment his white-suited figure and sharp skull seemed to personify the bone-like colours of the deserted town.

‘What is it?’

Ventress stepped forward. He held an envelope in his hand. ‘I found this in the cabin after you had gone, doctor. I thought I should return it to you.’

Dr Sanders took the envelope, feeling in his pocket for Suzanne’s letter. In his hurry he must have let it slip on to the floor. He pushed the letter into the envelope, beckoning Ventress into the room. ‘Thank you, I didn’t realise . . .’

Ventress glanced around the room. His compact figure, held together as if all the muscles were opposing each other at full tension, contained an intense nervous energy.

‘May I take something in return, doctor?’ Before Sanders could answer, Ventress had stepped over to the larger of the two suitcases on the slatted stand beside the wardrobe. With a brief nod, he released the catches and raised the lid. From beneath the folded dressing gown he withdrew his automatic pistol wrapped in its shoulder holster harness. Before Dr Sanders could protest he had slipped it away inside his jacket.

‘What the devil—?’ Dr Sanders crossed the room. He pulled the lid of the suitcase into place. ‘You’ve got a bloody nerve . . . !’

Ventress raised a hand to pacify him, anxious not to provoke the doctor. ‘Sanders, I apologise, of course. It was those idiots on board I was taking advantage of, not

you. Believe me, I have no prejudice against your particular calling . . . far from it—'

'That's generous of you.' Dr Sanders stepped over to the door. Ventress, however, stood his ground. For a moment he seemed to be trying to bring himself to say something. Then he gave a small shrug and left the room, as if bored by the doctor's irritation.

After he had gone, Dr Sanders sat down in the arm-chair with his back to the window. Ventress's ruse had annoyed him, not merely because of the assumption that the customs men would avoid contaminating themselves by touching his baggage. The smuggling of the pistol unknown to himself, seemed to symbolise, in sexual terms as well, all his hidden motives for coming to Port Matarre in quest of Suzanne Clair. That Ventress, with his skeletal face and white suit, should have exposed his awareness of these still concealed motives was all the more irritating.

He ate an early lunch in the hotel restaurant. The tables were deserted, and the only other guest was a dark-haired young Frenchwoman who sat by herself, writing into a dictation pad beside her salad. Dr Sanders left the restaurant after a single course, and began his search for some form of transport to take him to Mont Royale.

As the desk clerk had stated, there was no railway to the mining town. A bus service ran twice daily, but for some reason had been suspended. At the depot, near the barracks on the eastern outskirts of the town, Dr Sanders found the booking office closed. The time-tables peeled off the notice-boards in the sunlight, and a few Africans lay about on the benches, sleeping quietly. After ten minutes a ticket-collector wandered in, sucking on a piece of sugar-cane. He shrugged when Dr Sanders asked him when the service would be resumed.

'Perhaps tomorrow, or the next day, sir. Who can tell? The bridge is down.'

'Where's this?'

'Where? Myanga, ten kilometres from Mont Royale. Steep ravine, the bridge just slid away. Risky there, sir.'

Dr Sanders pointed to the compound of the military

barracks, where half a dozen trucks were being loaded with supplies. Bales of barbed wire were stacked on the ground to one side, next to a heap of sections of metal fencing. 'They seem busy enough. How are they going to get through?'

'They, sir, are repairing the bridge.'

'With barbed wire?' Dr Sanders shook his head. 'What exactly is going on up there?'

The ticket-collector chewed his lip. 'Going on?' he repeated dreamily. 'Nothing's going on, sir.'

Dr Sanders strolled away, pausing by the barrack gates until the sentry gestured him on. Fifty yards away, across the road, the dark tiers of the forest canopy rose high into the air like an immense motionless wave ready to fall across the empty town. Well over a hundred feet above his head, the great boughs hung like half-furled wings, the trunks leaning towards him. For a moment Dr Sanders was tempted to cross the road and approach the forest, but there was something oppressive about its silence. He turned and made his way back to the hotel.

An hour later he called at the police prefecture near the harbour. The activity by the steamer had subsided and most of the passengers were aboard. The speed-boat was being swung out on a davit over the jetty.

Coming straight to the point, Dr Sanders showed Suzanne's letter to the native charge-captain. 'Perhaps you'd explain, captain, why it was necessary to delete their address? These are close friends of mine and I wish to spend a fortnight's holiday with them. Now I find there's no means of getting to Mont Royale, and an atmosphere of mystery surrounds the whole place.'

The captain nodded slowly, pondering over the letter on his desk. Occasionally he prodded the tissue as if he were examining the pressed petals of some rare and perhaps poisonous blossom. 'I understand, doctor, it's difficult for you.'

'But why is the censorship in force at all?' Dr Sanders pressed. 'Is there some sort of political disturbance there? Has a rebel group captured the mines?'

I'm naturally concerned for the well-being of Dr and Madame Clair.'

The captain shook his head. 'I assure you, doctor, there is no political trouble at Mont Royale—in fact, there is hardly anyone there at all. Most of the workers have left.'

'Why? I've noticed that here. The town is almost empty.'

The captain stood up and went over to the window. He pointed to the dark fringe of the jungle crowding over the roof-tops of the poor quarter beyond the warehouses. 'The forest, doctor, do you see? It frightens them, it's so black and heavy all the time. In confidence, perhaps I can explain that there is some new kind of plant disease, beginning in the forest near Mont Royale—'

'What do you mean?' Sanders cut in. 'A virus disease, like tobacco mosaic?'

'Yes, that's it . . . ' The captain nodded encouragingly, although he seemed to have little notion of what he was talking about. However, he kept a quiet eye on the rim of jungle in the window. 'Anyway, it's not poisonous, but we have to take precautions. We are waiting now for instructions. Some experts will look at the forest, send samples to Libreville, you understand, it takes time . . . ' He handed back Suzanne's letter. 'I will try to find out your friends' address, you come back in another day. All right?'

'Can I go to Mont Royale?' Dr Sanders asked. 'The army hasn't closed off the area?'

'No . . . !' the captain insisted. 'You are quite free.' He gestured with his hands, enclosing little parcels of air. 'Just small areas, you see. It's not *dangerous*, your friends are all right. We don't want people rushing there, trying to make trouble.'

At the door, Dr Sanders asked: 'How long has this been going on?' He pointed to the window. 'The forest is very dark here.'

The captain scratched his forehead. For a moment he looked tired and withdrawn. 'About one year. Longer, perhaps. At first no-one bothered. . . '

three

ON THE STEPS outside, Dr Sanders saw the dark-haired young Frenchwoman who had taken lunch at the hotel. She carried a bulky, business-like handbag, and wore a pair of dark glasses that failed to disguise the inquisitive look in her intelligent face. She watched Dr Sanders as he walked past her.

‘Any news?’

Sanders stopped. ‘What about?’

‘The emergency.’

‘Is that what they call it? You’re luckier than me. I haven’t heard that term.’

The young woman brushed this aside. She eyed Sanders up and down, as if unsure who he might be. ‘You can call it what you like,’ she said matter-of-factly. ‘If it isn’t an emergency now it soon will be.’ She came over to Sanders, lowering her voice. ‘You want to go to Mont Royale, doctor?’

Sanders began to walk off, the young woman following him. ‘Are you a police spy?’ he asked. ‘Or running an underground bus service? Or both, perhaps?’

‘Neither. Listen.’ She stopped him when they had crossed the road to the first of the curio shops that ran down to the jetties between the warehouses. She took off her sunglasses and gave him a frank smile. ‘I’m sorry to pry—the clerk at the hotel told me who you were—but I’m stuck here myself and I thought you might know something. I’ve been in Port Matarre since the last boat.’

‘I can believe it.’ Dr Sanders strolled on, eyeing the stands with their cheap carved ivory ornaments, small statuettes in an imitation Oceanic style the native carvers had somehow picked up at many removes from the European art magazines. ‘Port Matarre has more than a passing resemblance to purgatory.’

‘Tell me, are you on official business?’ The young woman touched his arm. She had replaced her sunglasses, as if this gave her some sort of advantage in her interrogation. ‘You gave your address as the University at Libreville. In the hotel register.’

'The medical school,' Dr Sanders said. 'To put your curiosity to rest, if that's possible, I'm simply here on holiday. What about you?'

In a quieter voice, after a confirmatory glance at Sanders, she said: 'I'm a journalist. I work freelance for a bureau that sells material to the French illustrated weeklies.'

'A journalist?' Dr Sanders looked at her with more interest. 'I didn't realise . . . I'm sorry I was off-hand, but I've been getting nowhere today. Can you tell me about this emergency—I'll accept your term for it.'

The young woman pointed to a bar at the next corner. 'We'll go there, it's quieter—I've been making a nuisance of myself all week with the police.'

As they settled themselves in a booth by the window she introduced herself as Louise Peret. Although prepared to accept Dr Sanders as a fellow-conspirator, she still wore her sunglasses, screening off some inner sanctum of herself. Her masked face and cool manner seemed to Sanders as typical in their way of Port Matarre as Ventress's strange garb.

'They're expecting a physicist from the University,' she said, 'a Dr Tatlin, I think, though it's difficult to check from here. To begin with I thought you might be him.'

'A physicist . . . ? According to the police captain these affected areas of the forest are suffering from a new virus disease. Have you been trying to get to Mont Royale all week?'

'Not exactly. I came here with another man from the bureau, an American called Anderson. When we left the boat he went off to Mont Royale in a hire car to take photographs. I was to wait here so I could get a story out quickly.'

'Did he see anything?'

'Well, four days ago I spoke on the telephone to him, but the line was bad, I could hardly hear a thing. All he said was something about the forest being full of jewels, but it was meant as a joke, you know . . . ' She gestured in the air.

'A figure of speech?'

‘Exactly. If he had seen a new diamond field he would have said so definitely. Anyway, the next day the telephone line was broken, and they are still trying to repair it—even the police can’t get through.’

Dr Sanders ordered two brandies. Accepting a cigarette from Louise, he looked out through the window at the jetties along the river. The last of the cargo was being loaded aboard the steamer, and the passenger stood at the rail or sat on their luggage. After the bustle and *melée* of their arrival everything seemed quiet again.

‘It’s difficult to know how seriously to take this,’ he said. ‘Obviously something is going on, but it could be anything under the sun.’

‘Then what about the police and the army convoys? And the customs out there this morning?’

Dr Sanders shrugged. ‘Officialdom. If the telephone lines are down they probably know as little as we do. Why did you and this American come here in the first place? By all accounts Mont Royale is even more dead than Port Matarre.’

‘Anderson had a tip that there was some kind of trouble near the mines—he wouldn’t tell me what, it was really his story, you see—but we knew the army had sent in reserves. Tell me, doctor, are you still going to Mont Royale? To your friends?’

‘If I can. There must be some way. After all, it’s only fifty miles, at a pinch one could walk it.’

The young woman laughed. ‘Not for me.’ Just then a black-garbed figure strode past the window, heading off towards the market. ‘Father Balthus,’ Louise said ‘His mission is near Mont Royale—I checked up on him. There’s a travelling companion for you.’

‘I doubt it.’ Dr Sanders watched the priest walk briskly away from them, his thin face lifted as he crossed the road. His head and shoulders were held stiffly, but behind him his hands moved and twisted with a life of their own. ‘Father Balthus is not one to make a penitential progress—I think he has other problems on his mind. Dr Sanders stood up, finishing his brandy. ‘However, it’s a point. I think I’ll have a word with the good Father—I’ll see you back at the hotel later, perhaps

we can have dinner together?'

'Of course.' She waved to him as he went out, and then sat back against the window, her face motionless and without expression.

A hundred yards away, Dr Sanders caught sight of the priest. Father Balthus had reached the outskirts of the native market and was moving among the first of the stalls, turning from left to right as if looking for someone. Dr Sanders followed at a distance. The market was only half full and he decided to keep the priest under observation for a few minutes before approaching him. Now and then, when Father Balthus glanced about, Sanders saw his lean face, the thin nose raised critically as he peered above the heads of the native women.

Ambling along, Dr Sanders glanced down at the stalls, pausing to examine the carved statuettes and curios. The small local industry had made full use of the waste products of the mines at Mont Royale, and many of the teak and ivory carvings were decorated with fragments of calcite and fluorspar picked from the refuse heaps, ingeniously worked into the statuettes to form miniature crowns and necklaces. Many of the carvings were made from lumps of impure jade and amber, and the sculptors had abandoned all pretence to Christian imagery and produced squatting idols with pendulous abdomens and grimacing faces.

Still keeping Father Balthus under scrutiny, Dr Sanders examined a large statuette of some native deity in which two crystals of calcium fluoride formed the eyes, the phosphorescing mineral glittering in the sunlight. Nodding to the stall-holder, he complimented her on the piece. Making the most of her opportunity, she gave him a wide smile and then drew back a strip of faded calico that covered the rear of the stall.

'My that's a beauty!' Dr Sanders reached forward to take the ornament she had exposed, but the woman held back his hands. Glittering below her in the sunlight was what appeared to be an immense crystalline orchid, exquisitely carved from some quartz-like mineral. The entire structure of the flower had been reproduced and then in some way embedded within the crystal base,

almost as if a living specimen had been conjured into the centre of a huge cut-glass pendant. The internal faces of the quartz had been cut with remarkable skill, so that a dozen images of the orchid were refracted, one upon the other, as if seen through a maze of prisms. As Dr Sanders moved his head a continuous fount of light poured from the jewel.

Dr Sanders reached into his pocket for his wallet, and the woman smiled again and drew the cover back to expose several more of the ornaments. Next to the orchid was a spray of leaves attached to a twig, carved from some translucent jade-like stone, each of the leaves reproduced with exquisite craftsmanship, the veins forming a pale lattice beneath the crystal. The spray of seven leaves, faithfully rendered down to the auxiliary buds and the faint warping of the twig seemed characteristic more of some medieval Japanese jeweller's art than of the cruder sculpture of Africa.

Next to the spray was an even more bizarre piece, a huge carved tree-fungus, like a jewelled sponge. Both this and the spray of leaves glimmered with a dozen interior images of themselves refracted through the prismatic faces of the surrounding mount. Bending forwards, Dr Sanders placed himself between the ornaments and the sun, but the light within them still flickered and sparkled.

Before he could take out his wallet there was a shout in the distance. A disturbance had broken out near one of the stalls. The stall-holders ran about in all directions, and a woman's voice cried out in protest. In the centre of this scene stood Father Balthus, arms raised above his head as he held something in his hands, black robes lifted like the wings of some revenging bird.

'Wait for me!' Sanders called to the owner of his stall, but she had already covered up her display. Hurriedly, she slid the tray out of sight among the stacks of palm leaves and baskets of cocoa meal at the back of the stall.

Leaving her, Dr Sanders ran through the crowd towards Father Balthus. The priest now stood alone, surrounded by a circle of onlookers, holding in his upraised

hands a large native carving of a crucifix. Brandishing it like a sword over his head, he waved it from left to right as if semaphoring to some distant peak. Every few seconds he stopped and lowered the carving to inspect it, his thin face tense and perspiring.

The statuette, a cruder cousin of the jewelled orchid Dr Sanders had seen, was carved from a pale yellow gemstone similar to chrysolite, the outstretched figure of the Christ embedded in a sheath of prism-like quartz. As the priest waved the statuette in the air, shaking it in a paroxysm of anger, the crystals seemed to deliquesce, the light pouring from them as from a burning taper.

‘Balthus—!’

Dr Sanders pushed through the crowd watching the priest. The faces were half-averted keeping an eye open for the police, as if the people were aware of their own complicity in whatever act of *lèse-majesté* Father Balthus was now punishing. The priest ignored them and continued to shake the carving, then lowered it from the air and felt the crystalline surface.

‘Balthus, what on earth—?’ Sanders began, but the priest shouldered him aside. Whirling the crucifix like a propellor, he watched its light flashing away, intent only on exorcising its powers.

There was a shout from some of the stall-holders, and Dr Sanders saw a native police-sergeant approaching cautiously in the distance. Immediately the crowd began to scatter. Panting from his efforts, Father Balthus let one end of the crucifix fall to the ground. He looked down at its dull surface. The crystalline sheath had vanished into the air.

‘Obscene, obscene . . . !’ he muttered to Dr Sanders, as the latter took his arm and propelled him through the stalls. Sanders paused to toss the carving on to the blue sheet covering the owner’s stall. The shaft, fashioned from some kind of polished wood, felt like a stick of ice. He pulled a fifty-franc note from his wallet and stuffed it into the stall-owner’s hands, then pushed Father Balthus in front of him. The priest was staring up at the sky and at the distant forest beyond the market, the great boughs glistening in the sunlight.

'Balthus, can't you see . . . ?' Sanders took the priest's hand in a firm grip when they reached the wharf. 'It was meant as a compliment. There was nothing obscene there—you've seen a thousand jewelled crosses.'

The priest at last seemed to recognise him. His high narrow face stared sharply at the doctor. He pulled his hand away. 'You obviously don't understand, doctor! That cross was not *jewelled!*'

Dr Sanders watched him stride off, head and shoulders held stiffly with a fierce self-sufficient pride, the slim hands behind his back twisting and fretting like nervous serpents.

Later that day, as he and Louise Peret had dinner together in the deserted hotel, Dr Sanders said: 'I don't know what the good Father's motives are, but I'm certain his bishop wouldn't approve of them.'

'You think he may have . . . changed sides?' Louise asked.

'That may be putting it too strongly, but I suspect that, professionally speaking, he was trying to confirm his doubts rather than allay them.' Sanders touched Louise's hand. 'Tomorrow we must try to hire a car or a boat. If we share expenses it will give us longer in Mont Royale.'

'I'll gladly come with you, doctor. But do you think it's safe?'

'For the time being. Whatever the police think, I'm sure it's not a virus growth.' He felt the emerald in the gilt ring on Louise's finger, and added: 'In a small way I'm something of an expert in these matters.'

Without moving her hand from his light touch, Louise gazed at him with level eyes. 'I'm sure you are, doctor. I spoke briefly this afternoon to the steward on the steamer.' She added: 'My aunt's cook is now a patient at your *leproserie*.'

Shortly after midnight, as Dr Sanders lay half-asleep in his bedroom in the empty hotel, he woke to hear a quiet tap on his door. In the dim light of the corridor he found Louise Peret standing in her white dressing gown.

‘Louise . . . ?’ Uncertainly, he half-shook his head. ‘What—’

‘The window, doctor,’ She made no attempt to enter the room. ‘Go to the window and look up to the south-east.’

She waited as he crossed the faded carpet and unlatched the mosquito-netting doors. Peering upwards, he gazed into the dark, star-filled sky. In front of him, at an elevation of roughly 45 degrees, he picked out the constellations Taurus and Orion. Passing them was a star of immense magnitude, a huge corona of light borne in front of it and eclipsing the smaller stars across which it passed. At first Dr Sanders failed to recognise this as the Echo satellite. Its luminosity had increased by at least ten-fold, transforming the thin pin-point of light that had burrowed across the night sky for so many faithful years into a brilliant luminary outshone only by the moon. All over Africa, from the Liberian coast to the shores of the Red Sea, it would now be visible, a vast aerial lantern fired by the same light he had seen in the jewelled flowers that afternoon.

Thinking lamely that perhaps the balloon might be breaking up, forming a cloud of aluminium like a gigantic mirror, Dr Sanders watched the satellite setting in the south-east. As it faded the dark canopy of the jungle flickered with a million points of light the black surface of the river spangled like the back of an enormous sleeping snake.

f o u r

THE NEXT MORNING the body of a drowned man was fished out of the river at Port Matarre. Shortly after 10 o'clock Dr Sanders and Louise Peret walked down to the harbour by the native market in the hope of hiring one of the boatmen to take them up-river to Mont Royale. The market was quiet. Father Balthus' scene the previous day had dissuaded the owners of the curio stalls from putting in an appearance. A few boats moved across the river to the settlements on the far bank, but the

steamer had left on its return trip to Libreville and the harbour was empty.

Despite the hard compacted glitter of the forest during the night, by day the jungle had again become dark and sombre, as if the foliage were re-charging itself from the sun. Dr Sanders and Louise made their way along the wharfs, talking to the half-castes who owned the fishing boats. All of them shook their heads, or seemed too unreliable to trust.

'Is that the ferry over there?' Louise pointed a hundred yards along the bank, where a small group of people stood at the water's edge near a landing stage. Two men armed with poles were steering in a large skiff.

When Louise and Dr Sanders approached they saw that the boatmen were bringing in the floating body of a dead man.

The group of onlookers moved back as the body, prodded by the two poles, was beached in the shallows. After a pause, someone stepped forward and pulled it onto the damp mud. For a few moments everyone looked down at it, as the muddy water ran off the drenched clothing and drained from the blanched cheeks and eyes.

'Oooohh . . . !' With a shudder, Louise turned and backed away, stumbling a few feet up the bank to the landing stage. Leaving her, Dr Sanders bent down to inspect the body. That of a muscular fair-skinned man of about thirty, it appeared to have suffered no external physical injuries. From the extent to which the dye had run from the leather belt and boots it was plain that the man had been immersed in water for four or five days, and Dr Sanders was surprised to find that rigor mortis had still not occurred. The joints and tissues were soft and malleable, and the skin was firm and warm.

What most attracted his attention, however, like that of the rest of the watching group, was the man's right arm. From the elbow to the finger tips it was enclosed by or rather had effloresced into, a huge mass of translucent crystals, through which the prismatic outlines of the hand and fingers could be seen in a dozen multi-coloured reflections. This huge jewelled gauntlet, like

the coronation armour of some Spanish conquistador, was drying slowly in the sun, its crystals beginning to emit a hard vivid light.

Dr Sanders stood up as one of the watermen came forward. He stepped through the circle of onlookers and made his way up to Louise Peret.

'Is that Anderson? The American? You recognised him.'

Louise shook her head. 'No, that's the camera-man, Matthieu. They went off in the car together.' She looked up at Dr Sanders, her face contorted. 'His *arm*? What happened to it?'

Dr Sanders moved her away from the group still looking down at the body. They climbed up on to the wharf, and the doctor gazed around, trying to take his bearings. 'It's time to find out. Somewhere we've got to get hold of a boat.'

Louise straightened her handbag, searching for her pencil and shorthand pad. 'Doctor, I think . . . I must get this story out. I'd like to go to Mont Royale with you, but with a dead man, it's not just guesswork any more.'

'Louise!' Dr Sanders held her arm. 'If we don't leave this morning we'll never get away from here. Once the police find that body they'll put a cordon around the whole of Mont Royale, if not Port Matarre as well.' He hesitated, and then added: 'That man had been in the water for at least four days, probably carried downstream all the way from Mont Royale, yet he died only half an hour ago.'

'What do you mean?'

'Precisely that. He was still *warm*. Do you understand when I say we must leave for Mont Royale now? The story you want will be there, and you'll be the first . . .'

He broke off, aware that their conversation was being overheard. They were walking along the quay, and to their right, twenty feet away, a motor-boat moved slowly along the water, keeping pace with them. Sanders recognised the red and yellow craft brought to Port Matarre on the steamer. Standing at the controls, one hand lightly on the steering helm, was a tall raffish-looking man with

a droll handsome face and long muscular arms. He eyed Dr Sanders with a kind of amiable curiosity, as if balancing the advantages and drawbacks of becoming involved with him.

Dr Sanders motioned to Louise to stop. The helmsman cut his engine, and the motorboat drifted in a slow arc towards the bank. Dr Sanders walked down to it, leaving Louise on the quay.

'A fine boat you have there,' Sanders said to the helmsman.

The tall man made a deprecating gesture, then gave Sanders an easy smile. 'I'm glad you appreciate it, doctor.' He pointed to Louise Peret. 'I can see you have a good eye.'

'Mlle Peret is a colleague of mine. I'm more interested in boats just now. This one travelled with me on the steamer from Libreville.'

'Then you are old friends already. As you say, doctor, it's a fine craft. It could take you to Mont Royale in four or five hours.'

'Excellent, indeed.' Dr Sanders glanced at his watch. 'What would you charge for such a trip, captain—?'

'Aragon.' The tall man took a partly smoked cheroot from behind his ear and gestured with it at Louise. 'For one? Or both of you?'

'Doctor . . . ' Louise called down, still uncertain. 'I'm not sure—'

'For the two of us,' Dr Sanders said, turning his back on the young woman. 'We'll want to go today, within half an hour if possible. Now how much?'

For a few minutes they argued over the price, then agreed. Aragon started his motor, and shouted: 'I'll see you at the next pier, doctor, in an hour. The tide will have turned, it will carry us half the way.'

An hour later, their suitcases stowed away in the locker behind the engine, they set off up-river in the speed-boat. Dr Sanders sat beside Aragon in the front seat, while Louise Peret, her dark hair entrained behind her like a Medusa's crown in the slipstream, sat in one of the bucket seats. As they swept up the brown tidal

river, the arcs of spray rainbowing behind them, Sanders felt the empty oppressive silence that had pervaded Port Matarre lift for the first time since his arrival. The deserted, enigmatic arcades, of which they had a last glimpse as they headed out into the main channel, and the dark sombre forest seemed to recede into the background, separated from him by the roar and speed of the motor-boat. They passed the police wharf, where a lounging corporal and his men watched them sweep by on a wake of foam. The powerful motor lifted the craft high out of the water, and Aragon leaned forward, watching the surface for any floating logs.

There were few other craft about. One or two native outriggers moved along by the edge of the banks, half-hidden by the overhanging foliage. Half a mile from Port Matarre they passed the private jetties owned by the cocoa plantations. The half-filled lighters lay unattended under the idle cranes. Everywhere the forest hung motionless in the warm air, and the speed and spray of the motor-boat seemed to Dr Sanders like an illusionist trick, the flickering shutter of a defective cine-camera.

Half an hour later, when they reached the tidal limits of the river, some ten miles inland, Aragon slowed down so that they could watch the water more closely. Dead trees and large pieces of bark drifted past. Now and then they came across sections of abandoned wharfs that had been pulled off their moorings by the current. The river seemed untended and refuse-strewn, carrying away the litter of deserted towns and villages.

'This is quite a boat, captain,' Dr Sanders complimented Aragon, as the latter changed fuel tanks to preserve the balance of the craft.

Aragon nodded, threading the boat past the remains of a floating hut. 'Faster than the police launches, doctor?'

'I bet it is. What do you use it for? Diamond smuggling?'

Aragon turned his head, casting a sharp eye at Sanders. Despite the latter's reserved manner, Aragon seemed to have already made his own judgement of his character.

He shrugged sadly.

'So I hoped, doctor, but too late now.'

'Why do you say that?'

Aragon smiled to himself, looking up at the dark forest, draining all light from the air. 'You'll see, doctor. We'll soon be there.'

'When were you last at Mont Royale?' Sanders asked, glancing back at Louise. She sat forward to catch Aragon's replies, holding her hair against her cheek.

'Not for five weeks. The police took my old boat.'

'Do you know what's going on up there? Have they found a new mine?'

Aragon gave a laugh at this, and then steered the boat at a large white bird sitting on a log in their path. 'You could say that, doctor. But not in the way you mean.' He added quickly, before Dr Sanders could question him further: 'I really saw nothing. I was on the river, it was during the night.'

'You saw the dead man in the harbour this morning?'

Aragon paused for half a minute before replying. 'El Dorado, the man of gold and jewels, in an armour of diamonds. There's an end many would wish for, doctor.'

'Perhaps. He was a friend of Mlle Peret.'

'Mlle—?' With a grimace, Aragon sat forward over the helm.

An hour later, when they were almost half-way to Mont Royale, they stopped by a derelict jetty that jutted out into the river from an abandoned plantation. Sitting on the soft beams over the water, they ate their lunch of ham and rolls followed by café royale. Nothing moved across the river or along the banks, and to Sanders the entire area seemed to have been deserted. After the meal he walked away along the pier, picking his way carefully across the broken boards until he reached the bank. The forest had re-entered the plantation, and the giant trees hung silently in lines, one dark cliff behind another. In the distance he could see the ruined plantation house, creepers entwined through the rafters of the outbuildings. Ferns overgrew the gloomy garden of the house, running

up to the doors and sprouting through the planks of the porch.

When he returned Aragon met him half-way down the pier. 'How many soldiers are there in the Mont Royale area?' Sanders asked.

'Four or five hundred. Perhaps more.'

'A battalion? That's a lot of men, captain.' He offered Aragon a cigarette from his case. 'By the way, that drowned man . . . when you saw him, was he lying on a raft, by any chance?'

Aragon inhaled slowly on the cigarette, watching Dr Sanders with some respect. 'That's a good guess, doctor . . .'

'And as for this armour of light, was he covered with the crystals from head to foot?'

Aragon gave him a grimace of a smile, revealing a gold eye-tooth. He tapped it with his forefinger. '"Covered"—is that the right word? My tooth is the whole gold, doctor.'

'I take the point.' Sanders put away his case, gazing down pensively at the brown water sweeping past the polished timbers of the jetty. 'You see, I'm wondering whether the man, Matthieu his name was apparently, was dead in an absolute sense when you saw him. If, say, in the choppy open water of the harbour he had been knocked from the raft, but still held on in some way with one hand—that would explain a lot. It might have very important consequences. You see what I mean?'

For a few moments Aragon slowly smoked his cigarette, watching the few crocodiles that lay in the shallows below the opposite bank. Then he threw the half-smoked cigarette into the water. 'I think we should set off for Mont Royale now. The army here is not very intelligent.'

'They have other things to think about, but you may well be right. Mlle Peret thinks there is a physicist on the way. If so, he should be able to prevent any more tragic accidents.'

They walked back to where Louise was packing away the luncheon hamper.

Just before they started off Aragon turned to Dr

Sanders and said: 'I was wondering, doctor, why you were so eager to go to Mont Royale.'

The remark seemed by way of apology for earlier suspicions, but Sanders found himself laughing defensively. With a shrug he said: "Two of my closest friends are in the affected zone, as well as Louise's American colleague. Naturally we're worried about them. The automatic temptation of the army will be to seal off the entire area and see what happens. They were loading barbed wire and fencing in the barracks at Port Matarre yesterday. For anyone trapped within the cordon it could be like being frozen solid inside a glacier.'

f i v e

FIVE MILES FROM Mont Royale the river narrowed to little more than a hundred yards in width, and Aragon reduced the speed of their craft to a few knots, cautiously steering between the islands of rubbish that drifted by, avoiding the creepers that hung far out over the water from the high jungle walls on either side. Sitting forward, Dr Sanders searched the forest carefully, but the great trees were as dark and motionless as ever.

They emerged into a slightly more open stretch, where part of the undergrowth along the right-hand bank had been cut back to provide a small clearing. Suddenly, as Dr Sanders pointed to a collection of derelict out-buildings, there was a tremendous blare of noise from the forest canopy above them, as if a huge engine had been mounted in the top-most branches, and a moment later a helicopter soared past above the trees.

It disappeared from view again, its noise reverberating off the foliage. The few birds around flickered away into the darkness of the forest, and the idling crocodiles submerged into the bark-stained water. As the helicopter hovered into view again a quarter of a mile ahead of them, Aragon cut the throttle and began to turn the craft towards the bank, but Sanders shook his head.

'We might as well carry on. We can't make it on foot through the forest. The further we can go up-river the better.'

As they continued down the centre of the channel the helicopter continued to circle overhead, sometimes swinging up to a height of eight or nine hundred feet, as if to take a better look at the winding river, at other times soaring down low over the water fifty yards in front of them, the wheels almost touching the surface. Then, abruptly, it zoomed away and carried out a wide circuit of the forest.

Rounding the next bend, where the river widened into a small harbour, they found that a pontoon barrage stretched across the channel from one bank to the next. On the right, along the wharfs, were the warehouses bearing the names of the mining companies. Two landing craft and several military launches were tied up, and native soldiers moved about unloading equipment and drums of fuel. In the clearing beyond, a substantial military camp had been set up. The lines of tents ran off between the trees, partly hidden by the grey festoons of moss. Large piles of metal fencing lay about, and a squad of men were painting a number of black signs with luminous paint.

Half-way across the pontoon barrage a sergeant with an electric megaphone called to them, pointing to the wharfs. 'Au droit! Au droit!' A group of soldiers waited by the jetty, leaning on their rifles.

Aragon hesitated, turning the boat in a slow spiral. 'What now, doctor?'

Sanders shrugged. 'We'll have to go in. There's no point in trying to cut and run for it. If I'm going to find the Clairs and Louise is to get her story we'll have to do it on the army's terms.'

They coasted in towards the wharf between the two landing craft, and threw their lines up to the waiting soldiers. As they climbed up on to the wooden deck the sergeant with the megaphone walked down the barrage and greeted them with a smile.

'You made good time, doctor. The helicopter only just caught up with you.' He pointed between the warehouses to a small landing field by the camp. With a roar of noise, throwing up a tremendous fountain of dust, the helicopter was coming in to land.

'You knew we were coming? I thought the telephone line was down?'

'Correct. But we have a radio, you know, doctor.' The sergeant smiled amiably, then greeted Louise and Aragon, consulting a slip of paper. 'Mlle Peret? Monsieur Aragon? Would you come this way, please. Captain Radek would like a word with you, doctor.'

'Certainly. Tell me, sergeant, if you have a radio how is it that the police at Port Matarre have no idea what's going on?'

'What is going on, doctor? That's a question many people are trying to solve at this moment. As for the police at Port Matarre, we tell them as little as we think good for them. We're not eager to spread rumours, you know.'

They set off towards a large metal hut that formed the battalion's headquarters. Dr Sanders looked back at the river. Along the barrage across the channel two young soldiers walked backwards and forwards with large butterfly nets in their hands, fishing methodically at the water that ran through the wire mesh hanging from the pontoons. Several more amphibious craft were moored against the wharf on the upstream side of the barrage, their crews sitting about at the ready. The two landing craft sat low in the water, loaded almost to capacity with huge crates and bales, a random selection of household effects—refrigerators, air-conditioners and the like—and units of machinery and office cabinets.

As they reached the edge of the landing strip Dr Sanders saw that the main runway consisted of a section of the Port Matarre-Mont Royale highway. Half a mile away the road had been sealed off with a series of barricades. Beyond this point the forest sloped slowly upwards, giving way to the blue hills of the mining area. Lower down, by the river, the white roof-tops of the town shone in the sunlight above the jungle.

Two other aircraft, high-wing military monoplanes, were parked off the runway. The rotors of the helicopter had stopped and drooped downwards over the heads of a group of four or five civilians stepping out of the cabin. As he reached the door of the hut Dr Sanders recog-

nised the black-garbed figure walking unsteadily across the dusty ground.

'The priest! Balthus!' He turned to the sergeant as the latter opened the door. 'What's he doing here?'

'His parish is here, doctor. Near the town. We have to let him in.'

'And the others?' Sanders pointed to the civilians still finding their land-legs.

'Agriculture experts. They arrived at Port Matarre by flying boat this morning.'

'This sounds like a big operation. Have you seen the forest, sergeant?'

The sergeant held up his hand warningly. 'Captain Radek will explain, doctor.' He ushered Dr Sanders across the corridor, then opened a door into a small waiting room and beckoned Louise and Aragon into it. Louise began to remonstrate with the sergeant, but Aragon put his hand on her arm to silence her. He shrugged at the sergeant and then waved to Sanders.

'We'll see you later, doctor. I'll keep an eye on your suitcases.'

Captain Radek was waiting for Dr Sanders in his office. A doctor in the army medical corps, he was plainly glad to find another physician in the neighbourhood.

'Please sit down, doctor, it's a pleasure to see you. First of all, to put your mind at rest, may I say that an inspection party will be leaving for the area in half an hour, and I have arranged for us to go with them.'

'Thank you, captain. Naturally I'm delighted. What of Mlle Peret, she—'

'I'm sorry, doctor, but that won't be possible.' Radek placed his hands palm-downwards on the metal desk. 'We are keeping all journalists out of the area for the time being. It's not my decision but I'm sure you understand. Perhaps I should add that there are a number of things I cannot confide to you—our operations in this area, evacuation plans and so forth—but I will be as frank as possible. Professor Tatlin flew here direct from Libreville this morning—he is at the inspection site now—and I'm sure he will be glad of your opinion.'

'I'll be glad to give it,' Dr Sanders said. 'But I don't think it's really in my field of speciality.'

Radek smiled dourly across the desk. He made a limp gesture with one hand, then let it fall back onto the desk. 'Who knows, doctor? In many ways it seems to me that this business here and your own speciality are very similar. One, in a way, is the dark side of the other. I'm thinking of the silver scales of leprosy that give the disease its name.' He straightened up. 'Now, tell me, have you seen any of the crystallised objects?'

'Some flowers and leaves,' Dr Sanders said. He decided not to mention the dead man that morning. 'The native market at Port Matarre is full of them. They're selling them there as curios.'

Radek nodded. 'This has been going on for some time, nearly a year, in fact. First it was costume jewellery, then small carvings and holy objects. Recently there's been quite a trade here—the natives were taking cheap carvings into the active zone, leaving them there overnight and going back the next day for them. Unfortunately some of the stuff, the jewellery in particular, had a tendency to dissolve.'

'The rapid movement?' Dr Sanders queried. 'I noticed that. A curious effect, the discharge of light. It must have been disconcerting to some of the wearers.'

Radek smiled. 'It didn't matter with the costume jewellery, but some of the native miners started using the same technique on the small diamonds they smuggled out. As you know, the diamond mines here don't produce gemstones, and everyone was naturally surprised when these huge rocks began to reach the market. That's how it all started. A man was sent to investigate and ended up in the river.'

'There were vested interests?'

'Precisely. We aren't the only people trying to keep this quiet. The mines here have never been particularly profitable . . . ' Radek seemed about to reveal something to Sanders, and then changed his mind. 'Well, I think I can tell you, in confidence of course, that this is not the only affected area in the world. At this moment at least two other sites exist—one in the Florida Ever-

glades, and the other in the Pripet Marshes of the Soviet Union. Naturally, both are under intensive investigation.'

'Then the effect is understood?' Dr Sanders said.

Radek shook his head. 'Not at all. The Soviet team is under the leadership of Lysenko. As you can imagine, he is wasting the Russians' time. He believes that non-inherited mutations are responsible, and that because there is an apparent increase in tissue weight, crop yields can also be increased.' Radek laughed wearily. 'I'd like to see some of those tough Russians trying to chew a piece of this crystallized glass.'

'What is Professor Tatlin's theory?'

'Well, he agrees with the American experts. I spoke to him briefly at the site this morning.' Radek opened a drawer and tossed something from it across the desk to Sanders. It lay there like crystallised leather, giving off a soft light. 'That's a piece of bark I show to visitors.'

Dr Sanders pushed it back across the desk. 'Thank you, but I saw the satellite last night.'

Radek nodded to himself. He scooped the bark back into the drawer and closed it. 'The satellite? Yes, an impressive sight. Venus now has two lamps. Not only two either. Apparently at the Mount Hubble Observatory in the States they have seen distant galaxies efflorescing!' Radek paused, collecting his energies with an effort. 'Tatlin believes that this Hubble Effect, as they call it, is closer to a cancer than anything else—and about as curable—an actual proliferation of the sub-atomic identity of all matter. It's as if a sequence of displaced but identical images of the same object were being produced by refraction through a prism, but with the element of time replacing the role of light.'

There was a knock on the door. The sergeant put his head through. 'The inspection party is ready to leave, sir.'

'Good.' Radek stood up and took his cap from the peg. 'We'll go and have a look, doctor. I think you'll be impressed.'

Five minutes later the party of visitors, some dozen in number, set off in one of the amphibian craft. Father Balthus was not among them, and Sanders assumed he had set off for his mission by road. However, when he asked Radek why they were not approaching Mont Royale by the highway the latter told him that the road was closed. In response to Sanders' request, the captain arranged to make contact with the clinic where Suzanne and Max Clair were working. The owner of the nearby mine, a Swedish-American by the name of Thorensen, would tell them of Sanders' arrival, and with luck Max would be at the wharf to meet him when they arrived.

Radek had heard nothing of Anderson's whereabouts. 'However,' he said, 'We ourselves have had a great deal of difficulty in taking photographs—the crystals just look like wet snow, in Paris they're still slightly sceptical—so he may be hanging about somewhere, waiting for a really convincing picture.'

As he took his seat near the driver in the bows of the amphibian, Dr Sanders waved to Louise Peret, who was strolling along the wharf on the other side of the pontoon barrage. Aragon sat in the speed-boat, smoking and talking to some of the soldiers. The presence of the barrage seemed to mark off one section of the forest from the other, a point beyond which they entered a world where the normal laws of the physical universe were suspended. The mood of the party was subdued, and the officials and French experts sat in a quiet group at the stern, as if to place the maximum possible distance between themselves and whatever was to face them ahead.

For some ten minutes they moved forward, the green walls of the forest slipping past on either side. Then they met a convoy of motor launches harnessed together behind a landing craft. All of them were crammed with cargo, their decks and cabin roofs loaded with household possessions of every kind, perambulators and mattresses, washing machines and bundles of linen, so that there were only a few inches of freeboard amidships. Solemn-faced children sat with suitcases on their knees above the freight, and their parents gazed at them expressionlessly as they passed.

As the last of the craft pushed slowly through the disturbed water, everyone turned and watched it silently.

'You're evacuating the town?' Dr Sanders said to Radek.

'It was half-empty when we came. The affected zone moves about from one place to another, it's too dangerous for them to stay.'

They were rounding a bend, as the river widened in its approach to Mont Royale, and the water ahead was touched by a curious roseate sheen, as if reflecting a distant sunset or the flames of some silent conflagration. The sky, however, remained a bland limpid blue, devoid of all cloud. Then they passed below a small bridge, where the river opened into a wide basin a quarter of a mile in diameter.

With a gasp of surprise they all craned forward, staring at the line of jungle facing the white-framed buildings of the town. The long arc of trees hanging over the water seemed to drip and glitter with myriads of prisms, the trunks and heavy fronds sheathed by bars of yellow and carmine light that bled away across the surface of the water, as if the whole scene were being reproduced by some over-active technicolour process. The entire length of the opposite shore glittered with this blurred kaleidoscope, the overlapping bands of colour increasing the density of the vegetation, so that it was impossible to see more than a few feet between the front line of trunks.

The sky was clear and motionless, the sunlight shining uninterruptedly upon this magnetic shore, but now and then a stir of wind crossed the water and the scene suddenly erupted into fantastic cascades of colour that rippled away into the air around them. Then, slowly, the coruscation subsided, and the images of the individual trees reappeared, each sheathed in its armour of light, their foliage glowing as if loaded with deliquescing jewels.

Moved to astonishment, like everyone else in the craft, Dr Sanders stared at this spectacle, his hands clasping the rail in front of him. The vivid crystal light dappled his face and suit, transforming the pale fabric into a brilliant palimpsest of colours.

The craft moved in a wide arc towards the quay, where a group of launches were being loaded with equipment, and they came within some twenty yards of the trees, the hatchwork of coloured light across their clothes transforming them for the moment into a boat-load of harlequins. There was a round of laughter at this, more of relief than amusement. Then several arms pointed to the water-line, and they could see that the process had not affected the vegetation alone.

Extending outwards for two or three yards from the bank were the long splinters of what appeared to be crystallising water, the angular facets emitting a blue prismatic light washed by the wake from their craft. The splinters were growing in the water like crystals in a chemical solution, accreting more and more material to themselves, so that along the bank there was a congested mass of rhomboidal spears like the barbs of a reef, sharp enough to slit the hull of their craft.

A hubbub of speculation broke out in the launch, during which only Dr Sanders and Radek remained silent. The captain was gazing up at the overhanging trees, encrusted by the translucent lattice, through which the sunlight was reflected into rainbows of primary colours. Yet unmistakeably each tree was still alive, its leaves and boughs still filled with sap. Dr Sanders was thinking of Suzanne Clair's letter. She had written 'The forest is a house of jewels.' For some reason he suddenly felt less concerned to find a so-called scientific explanation for the strange phenomenon he had just seen. The beauty of the spectacle had turned the keys of memory, and a thousand images of childhood, forgotten for nearly forty years, filled his mind, recalling the paradisaal world when everything seemed illuminated by that prismatic light described so exactly by Wordsworth in his recollections of childhood. The magical shore in front of him seemed to glow like that brief spring.

'Dr Sanders.' Radek touched his arm. 'We must go now.'

'Of course.' Sanders pulled himself together. The first passengers were debarking from the gangway at the stern.

As he walked forward between the seats Dr Sanders started with surprise, pointing to a bearded man in a white suit who was crossing the gangway.

‘There—! Ventress!’

‘Doctor?’ Radek caught up with him, peering solicitously into Sanders’ eyes as if aware of the forest’s impact. ‘Are you unwell?’

‘Not at all. I . . . thought I recognised someone.’ He watched Ventress sidestep quickly past the officials and make off down the quay, his bony skull held stiffly above his shoulders. A faint multi-coloured dappling still touched his suit, as if the light from the forest had contaminated the fabric and set off the process anew. Without a backward glance, he stepped between two warehouses and disappeared.

‘Do you wish to rest, doctor?’ Radek asked. ‘We can pause for a moment.’

‘Not at all, captain. Let’s carry on.’

Their party was divided into several smaller groups, each accompanied by two NCO’s, and they moved off past the short queue of cars and trucks, which the last of the townsfolk were using to bring their possessions to the wharf. The families, those of the French and Belgian mine technicians, waited their turn patiently, flagged on by the military police. The streets of Mont Royale were almost deserted. The houses stood empty in the sunlight, shutters sealed across the windows, and soldiers paced up and down past the closed banks and stores. The side-streets were packed with abandoned cars, indicating that the river was the only route of escape from the town.

As they walked down to the control post, the glowing jungle visible two hundred yards away to their left, a large new Chrysler with a dented fender swerved down the street and came to a halt in front of them. A tall, blond-haired man in a baggy blue suit climbed out and looked around, then recognised Radek and waved him over.

‘That’s Thorensen,’ Radek explained. ‘One of the mine owners. It looks as if he hasn’t been able to contact your friends. However, he may have news.’

The tall man rested one hand on the roof of the car and scanned the surrounding roof-tops. Although of powerful build, there was something weak and self-centred about his long fleshy face.

'Radek!' he shouted. 'Come on, I haven't got all day. Is this Sanders?' He jerked his head at the doctor, then nodded briefly. 'Look, I got hold of them for you—they're at the mission hospital near the old Bourbon Hotel—he and his wife were supposed to come down here. Then ten minutes ago he phoned me and said his wife's gone off somewhere, he has to look for her.'

'Gone off somewhere?' Dr Sanders repeated. 'What does that mean?'

'How would I know?' Thorensen started to climb into the car, pushing his huge body into the seat. 'Anyway, he said he'd be down here at 4 o'clock. O.K., Radek?'

'Thank you, Thorensen. We'll be here then. It was kind of you.'

With a nod, Thorensen jerked the car into reverse, backing it across the street in a cloud of dust. He set off at speed, almost running down a passing soldier.

'There's nothing we can do,' Radek said. 'The Bourbon Hotel is about three miles from here, it's an old ruin. If we go there we might not get back in time.'

Dr Sanders nodded thoughtfully. 'It puzzles me—Suzanne Clair going off like that.'

'Perhaps she had a patient to see. Or do you think it was something to do with your coming here?'

'I hope not, but . . . ' Sanders buttoned his jacket. 'Well, we might as well take a look at the forest until Max gets here.'

Following the rest of the visiting party, they turned down the next side-street, and then approached the forest, which stood back on either side of the road a quarter of a mile away. The vegetation was sparser, the glass growing in clumps along the sandy soil. In the open space a mobile laboratory had been set up in a trailer, and a platoon of soldiers was wandering about, taking cuttings from the trees, which they carefully placed like fragments of stained glass on a line of trestle tables. The main body of the forest circled the eastern perimeter

of the town, cutting off the highway to Port Matarre and the south.

Splitting up into two's and three's, they crossed the verge and began to wander among the glacé ferns which rose from the brittle ground. The sandy surface seemed curiously hard and annealed, small spurs of fused sand protruding from the newly formed crust.

A few yards from the trailer two technicians were spinning several of the encrusted branches in a centrifuge. There was a continuous glimmer and sparkle as splinters of light glanced out of the bowl and vanished into the air. All over the inspection area, as far as the perimeter fence under the prismatic trees, the soldiers and visiting officials stopped to watch. When the centrifuge stopped they peered into the bowl, where a handful of limp branches, their blanched leaves clinging damply to the metal bottom, lay stripped of their glacé sheathes. Without comment, the technician showed Dr Sanders and Radek the empty liquor receptacle underneath.

Twenty yards from the forest, a helicopter prepared for take-off. Its heavy blades rotated like drooping scythes, sending up a blaze of light from the disturbed vegetation. With an abrupt lurch it made a laboured take-off, swinging sideways through the air, and then moved away across the forest roof, its churning blades gaining little purchase on the air. Everyone stopped to watch the vivid discharge of light that radiated from the blades like St. Elmo's fire. Then, with a harsh roar like the bellow of a stricken animal, it slid backwards through the air and plunged tail-first towards the forest canopy a hundred feet below, the two pilots plainly visible at their controls. Sirens sounded from the staff cars parked around the inspection area, and there was a concerted rush towards the forest as the aircraft disappeared from view.

As they raced along the road Dr Sanders felt its impact with the ground. A sudden glow of light pulsed through the trees. The road led towards the point of the crash, a few houses looming at intervals at the ends of empty drives.

'The blades must have crystallised while it was stand-

ing near the trees! ' Radek shouted as they climbed over the perimeter fence. ' You could see the crystals deliquescing, but not quickly enough. Let's hope the pilots are all right! '

Several soldiers ran ahead of them, stopping to peer through the trees. They were now well within the body of the forest and had entered an enchanted world, the great crystal trees hung with brilliant glass-like trellises of moss. The air was markedly cooler, as if everything were sheathed in ice, but a ceaseless play of light poured through the jewelled canopy overhead.

The process of crystallisation was more advanced. The fences along the road were so heavily encrusted that they formed a continuous palisade, a white frost at least six inches thick on either side of the palings. The few houses between the trees glistened like wedding cakes, their white roofs and chimneys transformed into exotic minarets and baroque domes. On a lawn of green glass spurs a child's tricycle glittered like a Fabergé gem, the wheels starred into brilliant jasper crowns.

The soldiers were still ahead of Dr Sanders, but Captain Radek had fallen behind, limping along and feeling the soles of his boots. By now it was obvious why the highway to Port Matarre had been closed. The surface of the road was pierced by a continuous carpet of needles, spurs of glass and quartz in places five or six inches high, reflecting the coloured light from the leaves above. The spurs tore at Dr Sanders' shoes, forcing him to move hand over hand along the verge.

Behind him an engine roared, and the large Chrysler he had seen with Thorensen plunged along the road, the heavy tyres cutting through the crystal surface. Twenty yards ahead it rocked to a halt, its engine stalled, and Thorensen jumped out. With a shout he waved Sanders back down the road, now a tunnel of yellow light formed by the interlocking canopies overhead.

' Get back! There's another wave coming! ' Glancing around wildly, as if searching for someone, he set off at a run after the soldiers.

Dr Sanders rested by the Chrysler. A marked change had come over the forest, as if dusk had begun to fall.

Everywhere the glacé sheathes which enveloped the trees and vegetation had become duller and more opaque. The crystal floor underfoot was occluded and grey, turning the needles into spurs of basalt. The brilliant panoply of coloured light had gone, and a dim amber glow moved across the trees, shadowing the sequinned lawns.

At the same time it had become considerably colder. Leaving the car, Dr Sanders began to make his way back down the road—Radek was shouting soundlessly to him—but the cold air blocked his path like a refrigerated wall. Turning up the collar of his tropical suit, he retreated to the car, wondering whether to take refuge inside it. The cold deepened, numbing his face, and making his hands feel brittle and fleshless. Somewhere he heard Thorensen's hollow shout, and he caught a brief glimpse of someone running at full speed through the ice-grey trees.

On the right-hand side of the road the darkness completely enveloped the forest, masking the outlines of the trees, and then extended in a sudden sweep across the roadway. Dr Sanders' eyes smarted with pain, and he brushed away the small crystals of ice that had formed over the eyeballs. As his sight cleared, he saw that everywhere around him a heavy frost was forming, accelerating the process of crystallisation. The spurs in the road were over a foot in height, like the spines of a giant porcupine, and the lattices between the trees were thicker and more translucent, so that the trunks seemed to shrink into a mottled thread. The interlocking leaves formed a continuous mosaic.

The windows of the car were now covered by a heavy frost. Dr Sanders reached for a door handle, but his fingers were stung by the intense cold.

'You there! Come on! This way.'

The voice echoed down a drive behind him. Looking around as the darkness deepened, Dr Sanders saw the burly figure of Thorensen waving to him from the portico of a mansion nearby. The lawn between them seemed to belong to a less sombre zone, the grass still retaining its vivid liquid sparkle, as if this enclave were preserved intact like an island in the eye of a hurricane.

Dr Sanders ran up the drive towards the house, and with relief found that the air was some ten degrees warmer. Reaching the porch, he searched for Thorensen, but he had run off again into the forest. Uncertain whether to follow him, Sanders watched the approaching wall of darkness slowly cross the lawn, the glittering foliage overhead sinking into its pall. At the bottom of the drive the Chrysler was now encrusted by a thick layer of frozen glass, its windshield blossoming into a thousand fleur-de-lys crystals.

Quickly making his way around the house, as the zone of safety moved off through the forest, Dr Sanders crossed the remains of an old vegetable garden, where waist-high plants of green glass rose around him like exquisite sculptures. Waiting as the zone hesitated and veered off, he tried to remain within the centre of its focus.

For the next hour he stumbled helplessly through the forest, his sense of direction lost, driven from left to right by the occluding walls. He had entered a subterranean cavern, where jewelled rocks loomed out of the spectral gloom like huge marine plants, the sprays of grass like white fountains. Several times he crossed and re-crossed the road. The spurs were almost waist-high, and he was forced to clamber over the brittle stems.

Once, as he rested against the trunk of a bifurcated oak, an immense multi-coloured bird erupted from a bough over his head and flew off with a wild screech, aureoles of molten light cascading from its red and yellow wings.

At last the whirlwind subsided, and a pale light filtered through the stained glass canopy overhead. Again the forest was a place of rainbows, a deep iridescent light glowing around him. He walked down a narrow roadway which wound towards a great colonial house standing like a baroque pavilion on a rise in the centre of the forest. Transformed by the frost, it seemed like an intact fragment of Versailles or Fontainbleau, its ornate pilasters and sculptured friezes spilling from the roof like fountains.

The road narrowed, turning away from the house, but

it annealed crust, like half-fused quartz, offered a more comfortable surface than the crystal teeth of the lawn. Fifty yards ahead Dr Sanders came across what was unmistakably a jewelled rowing boat set solidly into the roadway, a chain of lapis lazuli mooring it to the verge. He realised that he was walking along a small tributary of the river, and that a thin stream of water still ran below the crust. This vestigial motion in some way prevented it from erupting into the exotic spur-like forms of the rest of the forest floor.

As he paused by the boat, feeling the crystals along its sides, a huge four-legged creature half-embedded in the surface lurched forwards through the crust, the loosened pieces of lattice attached to its snout and shoulders like a transparent cuirasse. Its jaws snapped and jerked as it struggled helplessly on its hooked legs, unable to clamber more than a few inches from the hollow trough in its own outline now filling with a thin trickle of water. Its blind eyes had been transformed into immense crystalline rubies. Invested by the glittering light that poured from its body, the crocodile resembled some fabulous armorial beast. It lunged towards him again, and Dr Sanders kicked its snout, scattering the wet jewels that choked its mouth.

Leaving it to subside once more into a frozen posture, Dr Sanders climbed the bank and limped across the lawn towards the house.

High in an upstairs window, the bearded man in the white suit watched him, the shot-gun in his hands pointed at Sanders' chest.

To be concluded.

As a trail-blazer in modern SF, Brian Aldiss is matched by very few. Certainly no other British writer has his lightness of touch—a rare and valuable quality in a field which can sometimes take itself too seriously.

‘NEVER LET GO OF MY HAND!’

Brian W Aldiss

o n e

RET-THLAT'S FORE-CALIPERS turned the power up gently. With equal precision, his rear-calipers spun out the thread of the harmenstrank control. The forward antenna of his machine was now some 12⁵³ harmenstranks from his own dimension, probing gently across the infinite layers of creation.

‘Speed it up, Ret-Thlat,’ Pa-Flann advised, boredly. ‘My sense of hushed expectancy is growing noisy.’

‘If I turn too fast, we may slip past an entire dimension,’ Ret-Thlat explained.

‘What’s a universe more or less at that distance,’ his companion chirped. ‘It will probably be too far down the harmenstrank band to be comprehensible, in any case.’

‘In all the billions of dimensions—’ Ret-Thlat began. A grey light winking by his side cut him off. Instantly the

two of them leant forward, watching tensely as the realisers tuned themselves in. After a moment of silence, the circular central panel of the dimenscope flushed into life, and a picture appeared.

They stared fascinated at the new universe before them . . .

'Still there's one thing, my ducks,' Miss Stranks was saying cheerily, as she set her cup of Bovril back noisily into its saucer. 'You have got a strong and willing son to help you through your troubles.'

'Willie is a great help, Miss Stranks,' Mrs Gascoyne agreed, elbowing herself round in the great chair to peer irritably at her one and only. Almost instinctively, she gave a racking cough which shook her frail old frame without having the desired effect of attracting Willie's attention.

He brooded in shirt sleeves over a page of equations, pale, sullen, stodgy. Smoke hung damply about his tangled hair as the hand which held the cigarette clamped his brow in moody concentration.

'Poor dear! And with all these exams he's taking and all,' said Miss Stranks with windy sympathy.

It was the undignified word 'exams' rather than the cough which roused Willie. He winced and stood up, glowering.

'8.30, Miss Stranks,' he announced. 'Mother's bedtime. Thank you for coming to cheer us up, but I must now turn you out into the cold.'

Without ceremony, he tossed her fox fur across to her. She arranged it carefully round her scraggy neck, draping it over the plastic mack she had insisted on wearing even while crouching over Mrs Gascoyne's giant fire. She rose reluctantly.

'Thanks ever so for the nice cup of Bovril,' she said. 'I'll be round again next week same time. I was only saying to my sister yesterday, "Amy," I said, "them Gascoynes do your heart good. I never saw anything like it," I said, "for a mother and son sticking to each other through thick and thin," I said. "They're a proper example to some people," I said.'

Miss Stranks swallowed liberally as she moved to the door: she was a great one for emotion.

'And what did Amy say to that?' Willie could not forbear to ask.

'You're more than kind to us, Miss Stranks,' Mrs Gascoyne hurriedly interposed. 'I'm sure I've always tried to be a good mother.' She coughed again.

'I'm sure you have, ducks, and—'

'Jolly cold with the door open,' Willie exclaimed. 'It'll start Mother off if we don't take care, won't it, Miss Stranks?'

His hand in the small of her back, he propelled her firmly away from the lure of the fire. The door closing sharply behind her cut off her startled 'goodnight'.

'You get ruder every day, Willie. It's fortunate Miss Stranks has a forgiving nature,' Mrs Gascoyne said.

'If you mean by that, Mother, that she has a thick skin and will be back next Thursday, you're right. How you think I can work while she sits nattering there—'

'It's kindly meant, Willie—'

'Kindly, my foot! She says the same things week after week, guzzling cups of Bovril, and you expect me to sit there, slaving for this blessed degree—'

The little woman levered herself out of the chair, steadying herself against its arm.

'Wipe the tears of self-pity out of your eyes, boy, and help me upstairs.'

That's what he was, she thought, a great boy. Oh yes, he was forty, a slobby, middle-aged forty, and he had this wretched schoolmastering job in a prep school, but he was still a boy. It might be *his* meagre earnings they existed on, but he still depended on her as much as she did on him. He had no more mettle in him than his father had had.

Lucy Gascoyne followed that tired train of thought as they ascended slowly into the icy upper regions of the house. She was not old—only sixty one—but years in Arabia and a weak heart had told on her. If only she were young again, free of Willie, free above all of the burden of the disappointing years . . .

'You're as soft as your father!' she snapped, as she

reached the top step.

‘Don’t start that,’ he said evenly. ‘We both know father was a bloody old fool. If he hadn’t left all his cash to the Arabia Archaeology Trust, we shouldn’t be in this hole.’

‘Don’t you mention archaeology to me! I hate the word! When I think—’

‘I know, I know—when you think how you wasted the best years of your life helping him dig holes. Your bottle’s in your bed. Buck up and get in.’

As he spoke, he barged into his box-sized room, kicking off his shoes and trousers savagely. She was too much. She was getting like all the rest, saying the same thing over and over again, thinking in circles like a cockroach crawling endlessly round the bottom of a bucket. They were blunting his brain; he had a fine, mathematical brain, if only they’d give him a chance . . .

His mother took off her frock with cold fingers, put on a long nightgown, a bed jacket, a heavy pair of wool socks and a balaclava helmet that had once been Gascoyne’s, and climbed into the bed. She shuddered as she huddled down, thinking regretfully of the long winter nights ahead: thinking too, that there would be, finally, one winter night that would bring no dawn for her.

‘She’s a useless old burden,’ Willie muttered to himself. A burden: fine mathematical brains should not be burdened. And she was still as self-willed and changeable as ever she had been. Why should she drag him down? She had no gratitude. He loathed her.

Just suppose he waited till she was asleep and crept into her room. Suppose then he let out a scream . . . Her heart would not stand the shock; she would be snuffed like a candle.

The thought gave him a horribly delicious mixture of fear and pleasure—as it did every night. Then it suddenly came to him what other freedoms it would entail: not only no burden, but no Miss Stranks! Never to hear that dreadful woman’s platitudes again! Never again to hear the squelch of ingurgitated Bovril while he wrestled with complex variables!

He crept shiveringly across the landing, waited, until he could hear his mother’s breathing take on an even tenor,

gently turned the door knob and walked with determination into the dark. Trembling slightly, he tensed himself to scream.

The great circle of the dimenscope appeared glowing before him.

'Well worth waiting for!' exclaimed Ret-Thlat, rubbing a bundle of feelers together. 'These two-legged creatures seem to be the dominant species on this planet.'

'What is even more extraordinary,' said Mor-Sossa, who had just joined his two friends, 'Is that they manage to live on spherical planets.'

'Optical effect?' Pa-Flann hazarded.

Ret-Thlat shook his body in a decisive negative. Then, waving a caliper at the dimenscope screen, he asked, 'Shall we fish a couple of them up here?'

'Wait a bit,' Pa-Flann said. 'Let's watch 'em in their own environment for a while. It amuses me the way they live on the outside of their round planets.'

They panned the viewing angle lower and gazed with interest. They were on one of the square, several-celled buildings in which the bipeds lived. A biped with a sheet over it was lying absolutely still on a bed. Light filtered solemnly in from a narrow window whose top half was obscured by a blind.

Two other bipeds backed into the room. One walked over and raised the blind—he was podgy and moist of eye; the other whisked over to the bed—he was grey and jerky of movement, and carried a black bag. He pulled the sheet away from the prone biped and commenced an incomprehensible ritual which included opening the eyes of the prone one, who had white hair and wrinkled skin and still did not move despite the uncomfortable processes to which she was submitted.

The podgy biped continued to stare out of the window, not looking at the bed. His fingers flicked endlessly together behind his back.

'Is he communicating?' Mor-Sassa asked.

'Probably,' Pa-Flann agreed. 'Talking politics, I shouldn't wonder.'

The business on the bed was concluded and the prone biped left in what was evidently considered a suitable state of disarray. The other two had managed to cram it—her?—him?—into an incredible variety of garments including a brown helmet-affair which fitted over the head. They grey one then carried out a rough examination, opened and shut his mouth rapidly at the podgy one and they backed together out of the door.

The dimenscope's forward antenna followed them through it.

The grey biped with the black bag stood nodding his head inanely while the podgy one opened and shut his mouth, then backed down the stairs and out of the house. When he got outside, he knocked on the door, climbed backwards into a four-wheeled vehicle and moved off down the street.

Meanwhile, the podgy biped rushed to a shallow metal tray which contained several little white stubs, seized one, and rubbed it on the tray until it straightened out into a short tube and ignited, smoke coming from one of its ends. The grey biped's knock seemed to be a signal; when it came, the other immediately stuck the white thing between his mouth edges and sucked it, drawing smoke from the air until he had built himself quite a long white tube; this he placed in a box with others like it.

'Fascinating!' sighed Ret-Thlat. 'Shall we bring him up here now?'

'Hang on,' Mor-Sossa said. 'He's going to do something else.'

He was. He picked up a black instrument, made mouth movements, entangled his finger in a metal dial and then abandoned the thing. After that, he walked violently backwards up and down the narrow landing, occasionally glancing at the closed door and occasionally making white tubes.

Finally he went into another room and lay down on a bed. The light faded slowly and he switched on artificial illumination.

Unlike the prone biped in the next room, this one did not remain still . . .

Over the dimenscope, the three watched in rapture.

This was field study, this was genuine research, this was really learning how the other fellow lived. This was a moment to recall the words of the poet Rit-Ratscuf: 'There are more things in upijeegosh and ssidlawb than are dreamed of in your philosophy, Hor-Atio.'

Gradually the podgy biped was becoming more agitated. Twitching himself into action, he rushed backwards round the house and then, becoming pale of face, staggered into the room which contained the prone biped. He gripped the bottom rail of its bed, watching for a sign. At last it palpitated feebly. Then it palpitated horribly, half raising itself out of bed, gesticulating, flailing its little arms.

The podgy biped then moved to the side of the bed, suddenly flung up its own arms and opened its mouth wide. At this, the other was immediately still, crouching down with closed eyes, its skull half under the bed-covering.

'Get them now,' Ret-Thlat said.

Mor-Sossa cut off the visual record that was being made of this event and spun the forward field valve. At once the advance antenna, which had been watching the antics of the biped, dilated from the size of a marble into a great, glowing circle.

Pa-Flann was ready with the grips. He hurled them through the out-take and clicked with satisfaction as they seized the two bipeds with a multitude of plastic tentacles, injected a mild dose of paralysers, and pulled . . .

Next moment, Willie and Lucy Gascoyne were standing helplessly before them.

'I suppose you gentlemen must be Martians,' Mrs Gascoyne said at last, when the paralysis had worn off enough for her to speak.

'M-Mother,' Willie breathed, 'Can you see them too? I thought . . .'

They gazed, Willie with horror, Lucy Gascoyne with wonder, at the trio of beings before them. They were roughly banana-shaped, but bulbous at the lower end and at the top bursting into a dozen petals like cows' tongues, on which were, variously, eyes, mouths, antennae and other less easily identified organs of sense. Their bodies were yellow and pink and supported several clusters of limbs,

They wore no clothes.

‘The bipeds are poorly coloured,’ Ret-Thlat commented.

‘That’s what comes of living on the surface of your planet,’ said Pa-Flann sagely. ‘How about some refreshment?’

He chirped shrilly and curled onto a low bed, his eyes never leaving the odd specimens.

‘They’re very graceful,’ Lucy Gascoyne said doubtfully.

‘They’re obscene!’ Willie shuddered.

Ignoring him, his mother began to remove her balaclava helmet. With a questioning look at the Martians (as she was, for a long time, mistakenly, to think of them), she sank onto a spare couch and looked about her.

The walls of the chamber appeared to be of solid earth; they were not smooth, but fretted and serrated, with a curious intricacy, almost as if they had been chewed. She had hardly absorbed this impression when a curtain was swept aside and a creature entered in response to Pa-Flann’s call.

‘Ye Gods!’ Willie gasped. ‘Mother, can’t you think of something we can do?’

‘You think,’ Lucy said crossly. ‘I’m feeling a little faint.’

The newcomer was pear-shaped and walked on two legs. It had no head. Its belly was studded with pink teats.

It chirped at Pa-Flann, who beckoned it across to him. It extended two teats on long tentacles. Pa-Flann accepted them gratefully and put them into a couple of his mouths.

‘Refreshment, gentlemen?’ he inquired through a third. The others assenting, tentacles were extended to them. As they imbibed, they discussed what should be done with the bipeds. Obviously, they decided, the most important thing was to establish a common language.

They were interrupted by Willie’s vomiting. The spectacle of the pear-shaped creature slowly subsiding like a balloon was too much for him.

‘What do you suppose that is a gesture of?’ Mor-Sossa asked interestedly.

The others assenting, tentacles were extended to them.

Willie had decided to become violent. The dimenscope had been carelessly left on, and still, tantalisingly, showed a view of his mother's bedroom. He dashed at it, attempting to jump through. Unfortunately, the force field was only a one-way affair as far as living tissue was concerned, a receiver, not a transmitter. Willie fell heavily to the floor with a bleeding nose.

Chirping with annoyance, Ret-Thlat jumped up and switched off the machine. As he turned an eye round anxiously to see if their specimen had injured himself, Willie leapt up, pain lending him courage, and flung himself on Ret-Thlat.

Ret-Thlat was tougher than he looked. His pastel yellows and pinks flared into an angry purple, and he struck out with a leathery, toothed arm which instantly raised a weal across Willie's face. But Willie had impetus and weight. He bore Ret-Thlat down, locking his arms and legs round the plump body, fighting to seize the tongue-like protuberances which bore the other's sense organs.

Pa-Flann had already given a piercing whistle. Now the curtain was swept aside and half a dozen creatures burst in, creatures unlike either the scientists or the mobile stomach. These were tremendous scorpions, well armed with jaws, stings, shovels and claws. They made short work of Willie. He was paralysed and bound tightly by cord spun from the scorpions' entrails.

'So they use bodily attack!' said Ret-Thlat, whistling up another stomach and taking a strong suck. 'What good do you reckon he thought that would do him?'

'Perhaps they are irrational?'

They left that question in the hot air, and decided instead what should be done with Willie. If he was really dangerous, he obviously should be used for food, either at the breeding banks or among the scavengers. However, they were reluctant to lose entirely what was indubitably the better of their two bipeds, so in the end they agreed he should be sent to work on a surface scavenging farm for twenty-one dostobs, subject to the Queen's confirmation.

The scorpion horde bore Willie away.

During the fight and the following high-pitched harangue, old Lucy Gascoyne lay helplessly on her couch. She was tired, ill, and a little frightened.

As Willie was borne out, she sensed one of her turns coming on. With an effort, she pulled herself up and gestured feebly to her parched mouth.

Pa-Flann grasped her meaning. He chirped. A stomach, nicely bloated and pear-shaped, appeared. It thrust a teat into Lucy’s mouth. She almost gagged as a hot, fleshy tip squirmed onto her tongue. Then a thin liquid squirted onto her palate.

It was irresistible!

From that day on, she began to feel better.

t w o

A DOSTOB IS a period of roughly half a year. When Willie had served his sentence of twenty-one dostobs and at last returned to the underground world of Ssidlawb, he never expected to find his mother alive. So much had happened to change him, physically and mentally, that he felt merely numb when she confronted him, and took a considerable time to adjust himself to their relationship.

‘I thought you’d be dead!’ he told her bluntly.

‘Far from it! I feel younger every day. It’s the—food that does it.’

‘The food! I thought it was the air! Look at me, Mother—oh, we’ve been so long apart, can’t I call you Lucy? The very term “Mother” seems irrelevant here.’

‘I’d much prefer it.’

‘—Something’s had the same effect on me. See, I’ve shed all my flabbiness. Muscles like iron now! By jove, I’ve worked hard, but it’s been a tremendous experience! I’ve enjoyed every minute of it!’

‘Well! I never expected to hear you talk like that, Willie. Don’t you ever yearn to get back to Miss Stranks?’

‘Miss Stranks? Who was she? You know, Lucy, sometimes I even forget I wasn’t born here. Can we go somewhere to chat?’

‘Yes. Come to my house.’

'Your house, eh?'

'Oh, they've been wonderful to me Willie, absolutely wonderful. They are so different but so gentle.'

Once at the odd collection of cells Lucy called her house, they settled down for a good talk. Mobile stomachs were summoned and they began to exchange experiences.

Both had picked up a language from their captors: Willie the simple patois of the scavengers with whom he had mainly worked, Lucy the intricate mandarin of the ruling classes with whom she lived. For in the world of Ssidlawb society was divided into three distinct classes, the rulers, the feeders or mobile stomachs, and the scavengers, each being a distinct sub-species. There were also the Intermediaries and the Queens; apart from these and some scavengers, the rest of the Ssidlawb community was neuter.

'Which makes for a much more peaceful society than ever we knew,' Lucy commented. 'I wouldn't go back to that ghastly old family system for worlds. To be shut up in a semi-detached again . . .' Words failed her.

Willie told her about life on the surface, where no sun shone: the blank sky seemed to radiate an illumination of its own. The scavengers worked farms practically without supervision and sent forays into unknown territory. Willie had been their prisoner, but the work which was hard to them was light to him. A sea had just been discovered to the north. He was going back as a supervisor to open up the coast.

'You're going back, Willie?' Lucy said. 'I thought you'd stay and look after me.'

'You don't need looking after,' he grinned. 'You're doing fine. And I really must go back: I've just signed on for another twenty-one dostobs.'

The mighty subterranean lake threw up echoes like ripples around the distant roof of the cavern. Lucy splashed happily and turned to Ret-Thlat.

'Isn't it marvellous?' she said. 'This is the most beautiful place I ever saw. Aren't you glad I taught you to swim?'

'I'm the first Ssidlawbian ever to swim, and it's always nice to be first at anything,' he replied. They spoke in

mandarin, although his English was good.

‘You know, you’re funny people,’ she confided, reaching out in a burst of affection to stroke his back. ‘You have almost no technology in our sense of the word, no mechanical devices, cars or radios or the other things I’ve told you about, yet you suddenly up and invent a dimenscope.’

He smiled, a ripple of cerise passing over his body.

‘It’s the different way we think, Lucy,’ he said slowly. ‘Humanity was—is one species on its own: your animals cannot compare with you in brain power. Here we are three species, all interdependent, all helping each other. We don’t want motor cars. But we *did* want a dimenscope.’

‘And what’s become of it?’

‘I’m afraid one of the Queens had it destroyed; she said it wasted too much of Pa-Flann’s and my time. All the records are still intact though, if you want a peep at your old home.’

‘Heavens no, Ret-Thlat. That I could not bear. It all seems quite incomprehensible to me now.’

‘It did to me then!’

They both burst out laughing.

‘I must get out and dry,’ Lucy told him at length. ‘You know Willie is about due back? In fact—’

‘You’re psychic!’ Ret-Thlat told her, extending a leg to the shore. She looked in the direction he indicated.

Picking his way carefully round the giant stalagmites, a two-legged figure was making his way to the beach.

‘Willie!’ Lucy called, and splashed towards him.

Willie stopped abruptly and watched her as she waded ashore. He saw a mature and beautiful woman approaching. His heart beat heavily and his mouth went dry. He gazed until reminding himself angrily that he was her son, and then turned away.

‘Willie!’ she said, seizing up a towel. ‘Wonderful to see you again. Come and have a swim with us! It’s hot spring water; it’ll do you good.’

‘I don’t want to swim.’ He turned cautiously towards her, and saw Ret-Thlat was swimming an involved dog paddle to the beach.

‘You oughtn’t to go swimming in the nude with that

creature,' he said thickly.

Lucy gave an embarrassed laugh. 'I've given up those silly earth conventions years ago. Besides, Ret-Thlat is neuter.'

'It makes no difference. You're still my mother. I've a good mind to show him just where he gets off!'

'You'll do nothing of the sort. You don't understand—you never understand! Listen Willie, I'm as hard as nails, and if you cause trouble here I'll see you flung to the breeding banks. Understand that?'

He did. 'Nice welcome to give me,' he muttered, kicking the sand indecisively.

He was introduced to Ret-Thlat, who was as agreeable as ever. Lucy kept up a cheerful flow of conversation as they made their way back to the city. She told Willie how she had taken up her old love of archaeology again, and how—with Ret-Thlat's help and the encouragement of several of the Queens—she was compiling a book on the history of Ssidlawb. Willie answered in grunts.

Peevishly, he whistled a passing stomach. As it meekly followed him, he sucked with irritation at an extended teat.

'I've got a lot to say to you,' he told Lucy.

'You're going to live here with me from now on?'

He peered hard at her, trying to interpret the tone of her voice.

'I want to get back to Earth.'

'Well, I don't!' she said decisively. 'Back to cooking four meals a day? The culinary arrangements alone are enough to persuade any woman to stay here.'

'Culinary arrangements! Are you aware that this mash we get from the stomachs has already been pre-digested by the scavengers?—And that Ret-Thlat and Co. vomit up for the Queens? Doesn't that filthy chain of nutrition sicken you?'

As he spoke, Willie spat out the teat from his mouth; the gesture was too late: dramatically, his speech was already ruined.

Lucy said nothing, smiling merely. Ret-Thlat said, 'Lucy probably knows much more of our history and customs than you.'

'You stay out of this,' Willie snapped.

They had now arrived at Lucy's house. As she carefully explained, it was really Pa-Flann's and Ret-Thlat's abode, so there was no question of the latter's staying out. Ret-Thlat, however, promised to go into another room; mother and son were left alone.

For a moment, an awkward silence piled up between them. Then Willie gave an uneasy laugh and placed his hands on Lucy's shoulders.

‘Sorry I was stupid,’ he said. ‘It caught me off balance, seeing you after so long . . .’

She pulled away, presenting her back to him.

‘What was it you had to say to me, William?’ she asked, in a tiny voice.

He glared round the apartment in aimless fashion, chewing his lip, clicking his fingers behind his back.

‘I’ve had the time to take up a lot of my old studies,’ he said at last. ‘Been doing some maths, or trying to . . . Geometry . . . Know what the circumference of a circle is Lucy?’

‘Pi r squared,’ she answered automatically.

‘No. Not here, it isn’t. Here it’s pi r *cubed*. When I first saw their round dimenscope field appear, I thought “that’s an impossible circle!” It certainly was.’

‘It can’t be!’

‘It’s possible here. This world’s—well, fundamentally *different* in construction. And I’ll tell you another thing. We’ve built a port by the sea, up on the surface. We’ve got ships . . . I’ve watched them sail out and out over the water, until finally the distance swallows ’em up.’

‘Well?’

‘Well, they never go over the horizon. You can see them as far as the visibility will let you. This is a *flat world*!’

‘How can it stay in space if it’s flat?’

‘I don’t even know if it is in space. There are no nights, no stars, no sun.’

‘I’m afraid I can’t understand that.’ She had sat down now, looking timid.

‘Nor can I. We can’t understand their world any more than they could understand ours—not that we ever understood our own; it was just that we were used to it. But I’ve saved the most important thing till last.’

Lucy began pacing the room, saying she did not think she wished to hear anything more: he was making her unhappy. Why couldn't he be nice when he came back?

Setting his face in stubborn lines, Willie said, 'You know what I'm going to say, don't you? You're afraid aren't you? *Tell me how old I look.*'

For a long while she stared at him, taking in almost instinctively the pudgy weakness of his physiognomy, now fined down into an almost engaging delicacy; it was the face of a youth of 19 or 20. She wet his lips without saying anything.

'All right then,' he said, 'I'll ask you something else.' As he spoke, he seized her bodily, and swung her round until she was facing a full-length mirror. Ignoring her cry of pain, he shouted, 'Tell me how old *you* look.'

A fine, physically perfect woman gazed out at her with eyes echoing her own alarm. She knew that this reflection, which seemed to grow younger and fairer every day, was of a woman scarcely in her forties; but at this moment it was beyond her to speak.

'Well?' Willie inquired in a gentler tone, as if touching her soothed him. 'If you won't answer, I'll tell you. We've been here two periods of twenty-one dostobs, which, as near as I can calculate, is about twenty years. That makes you eighty-one! You carry your age well, don't you?'

Lucy broke into tears and was inconsolable for several minutes. At last she lay with his arms round her and said, 'I'm sorry, I'm all unbalanced. I thought I'd never be able to stop crying. It's the diet or something. But I'm *not* eighty-one!'

'Of course you're not,' Willie said consolingly. 'You're growing young again, Mother. We both are, we have been since the day we got here.'

'How did we manage it, Willie?'

'Don't tremble so. Wherever this world is, it's nowhere in the universe we knew on Earth. It almost might be, to outward appearances, but it just couldn't be quite I think it's another dimension . . . There must be some dimensions where *nothing* is like Earth—unimaginable . . . But there's one great difference here: time flows backward.'

‘But—’ She stopped, then said, ‘That can’t be, because Ret-Thlat and the others are growing older. Ret-Thlat’s quite green now, poor old dear.’

‘I was talking a little loosely. Imagine a man standing in England and another in Australia: If the Earth was suddenly deflated like a balloon, those two men would be standing almost sole of boot against sole of boot, with only a thin crust of earth between. Now if either of them was pushed through the crust, he would be standing on his head, compared with the other.

‘An exactly analogous thing has happened to us in the time scheme. I believe we’ve been hooked through into a dimension which was our Temporal Antipodes.’

She began to laugh. It was more violent than her crying. She gasped and looked stupid, and began over and over saying, ‘I was just thinking how funny—’ and then the laughter got her again and she was unable to finish the sentence.

‘Lucy,’ he shouted. ‘Pull yourself together! We’ve got to get back through that machine before it’s too late, before we both get too young!’

But Lucy only laughed.

Ret-Thlat hurried into the room, alarmed by the hysterical notes in her voice. At that moment, Willie struck his mother across the face: there was instant silence.

In that silence, Ret-Thlat whistled angrily for the scavengers.

t h r e e

THROUGHOUT THE TEEMING multitudes of dimensions and alternate universes, spawned as prodigally as daisies, as various as fingerprints, some factors, nevertheless, are common everywhere: they rule unaltered among the general diversity. Among such universals is love, possibly; fear, probably; death, certainly.

When Ret-Thlat died of old age, his friends Pa-Flann and Lucy, among others, attended his ‘funeral’ at the breeding banks. Lucy returned soberly along the interminable corridors; soberly, but not without impatience at

Pa-Flann's slowness of pace. He encircled her wrist apologetically with a caliper.

'I shall soon be going the way of my old friend,' he said, without rancour. 'Which reminds me . . . You know our custom here, whereby all orders given by a member of the ruling class lapse on his death?'

'I do.'

'Ret-Thlat sentenced Willie to life servitude for striking you with one of his hands. Willie is now free again.'

'Yes. I had realised that.'

'He has already returned here.'

'What? Already?'

'Already. He arrived yesterday, but I thought it best he be kept away from you until the funeral was over.'

'That was kind of you, Pa-Flann,' she said, with sinking heart.

When she was alone, Lucy spent a long while pacing up and down, debating, trying to control herself. The inhabitants of Ssidlawb were mild and unexcitable: having lived with them for so long, she felt it as an emotional ordeal to have to face a human again; but she was a woman of resolution. Finally, she went to Willie.

For the space of five seconds, the finely grown girl of twenty-seven and the small boy of six confronted each other like antagonists. Then he threw himself across the room at her.

'Oh Mummy, Mummy, don't let them take me away again!' he begged. 'Never let go of my hand any more!'

She took his wrist, and, disentangling him from her neck, held him at arms length. His pale face, with its wide, anxious eyes, was unmistakably Willie's. She could see in it the child he had once been, long before, and with that memory came one of his bronzed young father, eager to take the boy out to Arabia; and she could see the man he had been, and with that came a memory of a cheap, hired house and Miss Stranks saying, 'I do like to see a mother and son sticking to each other.'

'Willie,' she said sharply, 'Do you remember Earth?'

'Where we were before we were brought here?'

'Do you remember it?'

'Sort of . . . But you won't take me back there, will

you? I don’t want to grow up again.’

As he said it, her proud face hardened. She glanced round: they were private here.

‘How many mothers,’ she asked, ‘Would rear their children if they could see them as men, selfish, stupid, ageing? How many, do you think—if they knew when *their* turn came to be feeble and dependant there would be no mercy for them?’

He wriggled violently, but she would not let go of his wrists.

‘You’re frightening me!’ he cried. ‘You’re hurting me!’

‘Listen, Willie!’ she hissed. ‘Do you remember that time here runs backward? Do you?’

‘Yes. Oh yes. But you’re hurting my wrists.’

‘Never mind your wrists; listen to me. That was *your* theory of time. I checked it with Ret-Thlat, because he kept a visual recording of all he saw of us before he scooped us through his machine.’

Now Willie was utterly still. He whispered, ‘I don’t remember,’ but his teeth chattered as if he did. Lucy ignored him and continued.

‘I saw those recordings. They showed us in our house. They ran backwards for a few hours before Ret-Thlat actually broke through from this dimension to Earth’s. So what was on that film was *what would have happened if everything had gone on as normal.*’

She paused and said quietly, ‘And what would have happened, what in fact had happened on that film, was that you came into my bedroom and scared me to death; and the doctor came in the morning and certified I died from natural causes! Now!’

‘Oh, I don’t remember; I’m only your small boy—’

She swung him up off his feet, holding him in the air.

‘Yes,’ she said, savagely, ‘And again you’re in my hands. And now you want six years’ comfort and protection! Well you’re not going to get it. I’m not going through that again, not for anyone, not for you, Willie, my little Willie, you little *murderer* . . .’

She lapsed into incoherence, shaking him violently, ignoring his screams. And under all the shrill din, a still voice in her head told her, ‘Be careful: you’ll shake him

too much!' But there seemed to be no reason for stopping—what reason was there for anything?—how could she stop while he still screamed and screamed? And so she shook him and shook him, until his head rolled on his shoulders like an idiot's.

Even when he was entirely silent and cold, the screaming still rang on in Lucy's ears.

—Brian W Aldiss

Story Ratings

NEXT issue will contain the absorbing conclusion of *Equinox*, a new novelette by the American author Joseph Green, about, quite literally, a battle of minds, possibly a Moorcock story and other short stories and features. On sale **June 24th**. This is how readers voted on numbers 137-8:

No. 137

- | | | | |
|---------------------------|-----|-------------------|----------------|
| 1. The Dark Mind (2) ... | ... | ... | Colin Kapp |
| 2. Relative Genius ... | ... | ... | Philip E. High |
| 3. The Cliff-Hangers ... | ... | R. W. Mackelworth | |
| 4. No Brother of Mine ... | ... | Robert Presslie | |
| 5. Tee-Vee Man ... | ... | R. A. Hargreaves | |
| 6. When I Come Back ... | ... | Jonathan Burke | |

No. 138

- | | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----|----------------|
| 1. The Dark Mind (conclusion) ... | ... | Colin Kapp |
| 2. Dilemma With Three ... | ... | Donald Malcolm |
| 3. { The Last Generation ... | ... | R. W. Hill |
| { The Countenance ... | ... | P. F. Woods |
| 4. Toys ... | ... | John Baxter |

John Brunner is a writer with a fantastic output (indeed, one American publisher appears to do little else but produce his novels). His reputation in the States is probably even bigger than here. Brunner is also the composer of the well-known CND marching song **DON'T YOU HEAR THE H-BOMB'S THUNDER ?**

THE LAST LONELY MAN

John Brunner

'DON'T SEE YOU in here much any more, Mr Hale,' Geraghty said as he set my glass in front of me.

'Must be eighteen months,' I said. 'But my wife's out of town and I thought I'd drop by for old time's sake.' I looked down the long bar and round at the booths against the opposite wall, and added, 'It looks as though you don't see anybody much any more. I never saw the place so empty at this time of evening. Will you have one?'

'Sparkling soda, if you please, Mr Hale, and thank you very much.' Geraghty got down a bottle and poured for himself. I never knew him drink anything stronger than a beer, and that rarely.

'Things have changed,' he went on after a pause. 'You know what caused it, of course.'

I shook my head.

'Contact, naturally. Like it's changed everything else.'

I stared at him for a moment, and then I had to chuckle. I said, 'Well, I knew it had hit a lot of things—like the churches in particular. But I wouldn't have thought it would affect you.'

‘Oh, yes.’ He hoisted himself on a stool behind the bar ; that was new since I used to come here regularly. Eighteen months ago he wouldn’t have the chance to sit down all evening long ; he’d be dead on his feet when the bar closed. ‘I figure it this way. Contact has made people more careful in some ways, and less in others. But it’s cut out a lot of reasons for going to bars and for drinking. You know how it used to be. A bartender was a sort of professional open ear, the guy to spill your troubles to. That didn’t last long after Contact came in. I knew a tender-hearted bartender who went on being like that for a while after Contact. He got himself loaded to *here* with lonely guys—and gals too.’ Geraghty laid his palm on the top of his head.

‘Occupational risk !’ I said.

‘Not for long, though. It hit him one day what it would be like if they all came home to roost, so he went and had them all expunged and started over with people he chose himself, the way anyone else does. And round about then it all dried up. People don’t come and spill their troubles any more. The need has mostly gone. And the other big reason for going to bars—chance company—that’s faded out too. Now that people know they don’t have to be scared of the biggest loneliness of all, it makes them calm and mainly self-reliant. Me, I’m looking round for another trade. Bars are closing down all over.’

‘You’d make a good Contact consultant,’ I suggested, not more than half-joking. He didn’t take it as a joke, either.

‘I’ve considered it,’ he said seriously. ‘I might just do that. I might just.’

I looked around again. Now Geraghty had spelled it out for me, I could see how it must have happened. My own case, even if I hadn’t realised it till now, was an illustration. I’d spilled troubles to bartenders in my time, gone to bars to escape loneliness. Contact had come in about three years ago, about two years ago it took fire and everyone but everyone lined up for the treatment, and a few months after that I quit coming here, where I’d formerly been as much of a fixture as the furniture. I’d thought nothing of it—put it down to being married and planning a family and spending money other ways.

But it wasn't for that. It was that the need had gone.

In the old style, there was a mirror mounted on the wall behind the bar, and in that mirror I could see some of the booths reflected. All were empty except one, and in that one was a couple. The man was nothing out of the ordinary, but the girl—no, woman—took my eye. She wasn't so young; she could be forty or so, but she had a certain something. A good figure helped, but most of it was in the face. She was thin, with a lively mouth and laughter-wrinkles round the eyes, and she was clearly enjoying whatever she was talking about. It was pleasant to watch her enjoying it. I kept my eyes on her while Geraghty held forth.

'Like I say, it makes people more careful, and less careful. More careful about the way they treat others, because if they don't behave their own Contacts are liable to expunge them, and then where will they be? Less careful about the way they treat themselves, because they aren't scared much of dying any more. They know that if it happens quick, without pain, it'll just be a blur and then confusion and then picking up again and then melting into someone else. No sharp break, no stopping. Have you picked anyone up, Mr Hale?'

'Matter of fact, I have,' I said. 'I picked up my father just about a year ago.'

'And was it okay?'

'Oh, smooth as oil. Disconcerting for a while—like having an itch I couldn't scratch—but that passed in about two to three months and then he just blended in and there it was.'

I thought about it for a moment. In particular, I thought about the peculiar sensation of being able to remember how I looked in my cradle, from outside, and things like that. But it was comforting as well as peculiar, and anyway there was never any doubt about whose memory it was. All the memories that came over when a Contact was completed had indefinable auras that labelled them and helped keep the receiver's mind straight.

'And you?' I said.

Geraghty nodded. 'Guy I knew in the Army. Just a few weeks back he had a car-smash. Poor guy lived for

ten days with a busted back, going through hell. He was in bad shape when he came over. Pain—it was terrible !”

‘Ought to write your Congressman,’ I said. ‘Get this new bill through. Hear about it ?’

‘Which one ?’

‘Legalise mercy-killing provided the guy has a valid Contact. Everyone has nowadays, so why not ?’

Geraghty looked thoughtful. ‘Yes, I did hear about it. I wasn’t happy about it. But since I picked up my buddy and got his memory of what happened—well I guess I’m changing my mind. I’ll do like you say.’

We were quiet for a bit then, thinking about what Contact had done for the world. Geraghty had said he wasn’t happy at first about this euthanasia bill—well, I and a lot of other people weren’t sure about Contact at first, either. Then we saw what it could do, and had a chance to think the matter out, and now I felt I didn’t understand how I’d gone through so much of my life without it. I just couldn’t think myself back to a world where when you died you had to stop. It was horrible !

With Contact, that problem was solved. Dying became like a change of vehicle. You blurred, maybe blacked out, knowing you would come to, as it were, looking out of somebody’s eyes that you had Contact with. You wouldn’t be in control any more, but he or she would have your memories, and for two or three months you’d ease around, fitting yourself to your new partner and then bit by bit there’d be a shift of viewpoint, and finally a melting together, and *click*. No interruption ; just a smooth painless process taking you on into another instalment of life as someone who was neither you nor someone else, but a product of the two.

For the receiver, as I knew from experience, it was at worst uncomfortable, but for someone you were fond of you could take far more than discomfort.

Thinking of what life had been like before Contact, I found myself shuddering. I ordered another drink—a double this time. I hadn’t been out drinking for a long while.

I'd been telling Geraghty the news for maybe an hour, and I was on my third or fourth drink, when the door of the bar opened and a guy came in. He was medium-sized, rather ordinary, fairly well-dressed, and I wouldn't have looked at him twice except for the expression on his face. He looked so angry and miserable I couldn't believe my eyes.

He went up to this booth where the couple were sitting—the one where the woman was that I'd been watching—and planted his feet on the ground facing them. All the attractive light went out of the woman's face, and the man with her got half to his feet as if in alarm.

'You know,' Geraghty said softly, 'that looks like trouble. I haven't had a row in this bar for more than a year, but I remember what one looks like when it's brewing.'

He got up off his stool watchfully, and moved down the bar so he could go through the gap in the counter if he had to.

I swivelled on my stool and caught some of the conversation. As far as I could hear, it was going like this.

'You expunged me, Mary!' the guy with the miserable face was saying. '*Did you?*'

'Now look here!' the other man cut in. 'It's up to her whether she does or doesn't.'

'You shut up,' the newcomer said. 'Well, Mary? *Did you?*'

'Yes, Mack, I did,' she said. 'Sam had nothing to do with it. It was entirely my idea—and your fault.'

I couldn't see Mack's face, but his body sort of tightened up, shaking, and he put his arms out as though he was going to haul Mary out of her seat. Sam—I presumed Sam was the man in the booth—seized his arm, yelling at him.

That was where Geraghty came in, ordering them to quit where they were. They didn't like it, but they did, and Mary and Sam finished their drinks and went out of the bar, and Mack, after glaring after them, came up and took a stool next but one to mine.

'Rye,' he said. 'Gimme the bottle—I'll need it.'

His voice was rasping and bitter, a tone I realised I hadn't heard in maybe months. I suppose I looked curious; anyway, he glanced at me and saw I was looking at him, and

spoke to me.

‘Know what that was all about?’

I shrugged. ‘Lost your girl?’ I suggested.

‘Much worse than that—and she isn’t so much a lost girl as a heartless she-devil.’ He tossed down the first of the rye that Geraghty had brought for him. I noticed that Geraghty had moved to the other end of the counter and was washing glasses. If he was out of the habit of listening to people’s troubles, I wouldn’t blame him, I thought.

‘She didn’t look that way,’ I said at random.

‘No, she doesn’t.’ He took another drink and then sat for a while with the empty glass between his hands, staring at it.

‘I suppose you have Contacts?’ he said at last. It was a pretty odd question, and I answered it automatically out of sheer surprise.

‘Well—yes of course I have!’

‘I haven’t,’ he said. ‘Not now. Not any more. *Damn* that woman!’

I felt the nape of my neck prickle. If he was telling the truth—well, he was a kind of living ghost! Everyone I knew had at least one Contact; I had three. My wife and I had a mutual, of course, like all married couples, and as insurance against our being killed together in a car wreck or by some similar accident I had an extra one with my kid brother Joe and a third with a guy I’d known in college. At least, I was fairly sure I did; I hadn’t heard from him in some months and he might perhaps have expunged me. I made a mental note to look him up and keep the friendship moving.

I studied this lonely guy. His name was Mack—I’d heard him called that. He was probably ten years older than I was, which made him in his middle forties—plenty old enough to have dozens of potential Contacts. There was nothing visibly wrong with him except this look of unspeakable misery he wore—and if he really had no Contacts at all, then I was surprised the look was of mere misery, not of terror.

‘Did—uh—did Mary know that she was your only Contact?’ I said.

‘Oh, she knew. Of course. That’s why she did it

without telling me.' Mack refilled his glass and held the bottle towards me. I was going to refuse, but if someone didn't keep the poor devil company he'd probably empty the bottle himself, and then maybe walk out staggering drunk and fall under a car and be done for. I really felt sorry for him. Anyone would have.

'How did you find out?'

'She—well, she went out tonight and I called at her place and someone said she'd gone out with Sam, and Sam generally brings her here. And there she was, and when I put it to her she confessed. I guess it was as well the bartender stepped in, or I'd have lost control and maybe done something really serious to her.'

I said, 'Well—how come she's the only one? Have you no friends or anything?'

That opened the floodgates.

The poor guy—his full name was Mack Wilson—was an orphan brought up in a foundling home which he hated; he ran away in his teens and was committed to reform school for some petty theft or other, and hated that too, and by the time he got old enough to earn his living he was sour on the world, but he'd done his best to set himself straight, only to find that he'd missed learning how. Somewhere along the line he'd failed to get the knack of making friends.

When he'd told me the whole story, I felt he was truly pitiable. When I contrasted his loneliness with my comfortable condition I felt almost ashamed. Maybe the rye had a lot to do with it, but it didn't feel that way. I wanted to cry, and I hardly even felt foolish for wanting.

Round about ten or ten-thirty, when most of the bottle had gone, he slapped the counter and started to get down from his stool. He wobbled frighteningly. I caught hold of him, but he brushed me aside.

'Home, I guess,' he said hopelessly. 'If I can make it. If I don't get run down by some lucky so-and-so who's careless what he hits because he's all right, he has Contacts aplenty.'

He was darned right—that was the trouble. I said, 'Look, don't you think you should sober up first?'

'How in hell do you think I'll get to sleep if I'm not pickled?' he retorted. And he was probably right there,

too. He went on, 'You wouldn't know, I guess : what it's like to lie in bed, staring into the dark, without a Contact anywhere. It makes the whole world seem hateful and dark and hostile . . .'

'Jesus !' I said, because that really hit me.

A sudden glimmer of hope came into his eyes. He said, 'I don't suppose—no, it's not fair. You're a total stranger. Forget it.'

I pressed him, because it was good to see any trace of hope on *that* face. After a bit of hesitation, he came out with it.

'You wouldn't make a Contact with me, would you ? Just to tide me over till I talk one of my friends round ? I know guys at work I could maybe persuade. Just a few days, that's all.'

'At this time of night ?' I said. I wasn't sure I liked the idea ; still, I'd have him on my conscience if I didn't fall in.

'They have all-night Contact service at LaGuardia Airport,' he said. 'For people who want to make an extra one as insurance before going on a long flight. We could go there.'

'It'll have to be a one-way, not a mutual,' I said. 'I don't have twenty-five bucks to spare.'

'You'll do it ?' He looked as though he couldn't believe his ears. Then he grabbed my hand and pumped it up and down, and settled his check and hustled me to the door and found a cab and we were on the way to the airport before I really knew what was happening.

The consultant at the airport tried to talk me into having a mutual ; Mack had offered to pay for it. But I stood firm on that. I don't believe in people adding Contacts to their list when the others are real friends. If something were to happen to me, I felt, and somebody other than my wife, or my brother, or my long-time friend from college, were to pick me up, I was certain they'd all three be very much hurt by it. So since there were quite a few customers waiting to make an extra Contact before flying to Europe, the consultant didn't try too hard.

It had always been a source of wonder to me that Contact was such a simple process. Three minutes' fiddling with the equipment ; a minute or two to put the helmets properly

on our heads ; mere seconds for the scan to go to completion during which the brain buzzed with fragments of memory dredged up from nowhere and presented like a single movie frames to consciousness . . . and finished.

The consultant gave us the standard certificates and the warranty form—valid five years, recommended reinforcement, owing to personality development, temporal-geographical factor, in the event of death instantaneous transfer, adjustment lapse, in the event of more than one Contact being extant some possibility of choice, and so on. And there it was.

I never had been able to make sense of the principle on which Contact worked. I knew it wasn't possible before the advent of printed-molecule electronics, which pushed the information capacity of computers up to the level of the human brain and beyond. I knew vaguely that in the first place they had been trying to achieve mechanical telepathy, and that they succeeded in finding means to scan the entire content of a brain and transfer it to an electronic store. I knew also that telepathy didn't come, but immortality did.

What it amounted to, in lay terms, was this : only the advent of death was enough of a shock to the personality to make it want to get up and go. Then it wanted but *desperately*. If at some recent time the personality had been as it were shown to someone else's mind, there was a place ready for it to go to.

At that point I lost touch with the explanations. So did practically everybody. Resonance came into it, and maybe the receiver's mind vibrated in sympathy with the mind of the person about to die ; that was a fair picture, and the process worked, so what more could anyone ask ?

I was later in coming out from under than he was ; this was a one-way, and he was being scanned which is quick, while I was being printed which is slightly slower. When I came out he was trying to get something straight with the consultant, who wasn't interested, but he wouldn't be just pushed aside—he had to have his answer. He got it as I was emerging from under the helmet.

'No, there's no known effect. Sober or drunk, the process goes through !'

The point had never occurred to me before—whether

liquor would foul up the accuracy of the Contact.

Thinking of the liquor reminded me that I'd drunk a great deal of rye and it was the first time I'd had more than a couple of beers in many months. For a little while I had a warm glow, partly from the alcohol partly from the knowledge that thanks to me this last lonely man wasn't lonely any more.

Then I began to lose touch. I think it was because Mack had brought the last of the bottle along and insisted on our toasting our new friendship—or words like that. Anyway, I remember that he got the cab and told the hackie my address and then it was the next morning and he was sleeping on the couch in the rumpus room and the doorbell was going like an electric alarm.

I pieced these facts together a little afterwards. When I opened the door, it was Mary standing there. The woman who had expunged Mack the day before.

She came in quite politely, but with a determined expression which I couldn't resist in my morning-after state, and told me to sit down and took a chair herself.

She said, 'Was it true what Mack told me on the phone?'

I looked vacant. I *felt* vacant.

Impatiently, she said, 'About him making a Contact with you. He called me up at two a.m. and told me the whole story. I wanted to throw the phone out the window, but I hung on and got your name out of him, and some of your address, and the rest from the phone book. Because I wouldn't want anybody to have Mack wished on him. Not anybody.'

By this time I was starting to connect. But I didn't have much to say. I let her get on with it.

'I once read a story,' she said. 'I don't remember who by. Perhaps you've read it too. About a man who saved another man from drowning. And the guy was grateful gave him presents, tried to do him favours, said he was his only friend in all the world, dogged his footsteps, moved into his home—and finally the guy who'd saved him couldn't stand it any longer and took him and pushed him back in the river. That's Mack Wilson. That's why Mack Wilson has been expunged by everybody he's conned into making Contact with him in the past two mortal years. I stood it

for going on three months, and that's about the record, as I understand it.'

There was a click, a door opening, and there was Mack in shirt and pants, roused from his sleep in the rumpus room by the sound of Mary's voice. She got in first. She said, 'You see? He's started already.'

'You!' Mack said. 'Haven't you done enough?' And he turned to me. 'She isn't satisfied with expunging me and leaving me without a Contact in the world. She has to come here and try to talk you into doing the same! Can you imagine anybody hating me like that?'

On the last word his voice broke, and I saw that there were real tears in his eyes.

I put my muddled mind together and found something to say.

'Look,' I said. 'All I did this for was just that I don't think anyone should have to go without a Contact nowadays. All I did it for was to tide Mack over.' I was mainly talking to Mary. 'I drank too much last night and he brought me home and that was why he's here this morning. I don't care who he is or what he's done—I have Contacts myself, I don't know what I'd do if I didn't, and until Mack fixes up something maybe with somebody where he works I'll go bail for him. That's all.'

'That's the way it started with me,' Mary said. 'Then he moved into my apartment. Then he started following me on the street to make sure nothing happened to me. He said.'

'Where would I have been if something had?' Mack protested.

Just then I caught sight of the clock on the wall, and saw it was noon. I jumped up.

'Jesus!' I said. 'My wife and kids get back at four, and I promised to clear the apartment up while they were away.'

'I'll give you a hand,' Mack said. 'I owe you that, at least.'

Mary got to her feet. She was looking at me with a hopeless expression. 'Don't say you weren't warned,' she said.

So she was right. So Mack was very helpful. He was better around the house than a lot of women I've known,

and though it took right up until my wife got home with the children the job was perfect. Even my wife was impressed. So since it was getting on towards the evening she insisted on Mack staying for supper with us, and he went and got some beer and over it he told my wife the spot that he'd been put in, and then at around nine or half past he said he wanted an early night because of work tomorrow, and went home.

Which seemed great under the circumstances. I dismissed what Mary had said as the bitterness of a disappointed woman, and felt sorry for her. She hadn't looked the type to be so bitter when I first saw her the evening before.

It was about three or four days later that I began to catch on. There was this new craze for going to see pre-Contact movies, and though I didn't feel that I would get a bang out of watching soldiers and gunmen kill each other without Contact to look forward to, my wife had been told by all her friends that she oughtn't to miss out on this eerie thrill.

Only there was the problem of the kids. We couldn't take eleven-month twins along, very well. And we'd lost our regular sitter and when we checked up there just didn't seem to be anyone on hand.

I tried to talk her into going alone, but she didn't like the idea. I'd noticed that she'd given up watching pre-Contact programmes on TV, so that was of a piece.

So we'd decided to scrap the idea, though I knew she was disappointed, until Mack called, heard the problem, and at once offered to sit in.

Great, we thought. He seemed willing, competent, and even eager to do us the favour, and we had no worries about going out. The kids were fast asleep before we left.

We parked the car and started to walk around to the movie house. It was getting dark, and it was chilly, so we hurried along although we had plenty of time before the start of the second feature.

Suddenly my wife glanced back and stopped dead in her tracks. A man and a boy following close behind bumped into her, and I had to apologise and when they'd gone on asked what on earth was the trouble.

'I thought I saw Mack following us,' she said. 'Funny . . .'

'Very funny,' I agreed. 'Where?' I looked along the sidewalk, but there were a lot of people, including several who were dressed and built similarly to Mack. I pointed this out, and she agreed that she'd probably been mistaken. I couldn't get her to go beyond *probably*.

The rest of our walk to the movie was a kind of sidelong hobble, because she kept staring behind her. It got embarrassing after a while, and suddenly I thought I understood why she was doing it.

I said, 'You're not really looking forward to this, are you?'

'What do you mean?' she said, injured. 'I've been looking forward to it all week.'

'You can't really be,' I argued. 'Your subconscious is playing tricks on you—making you think you see Mack, so that you'll have an excuse to go back home instead of seeing the movies. If you're only here because of your *kaffeeklatsch* friends who've talked you into the idea, and you don't actually think you'll enjoy it, let's go.'

I saw from her expression I was at least half right. But she shook her head. 'Don't be silly,' she said. 'Mack would think it was awfully funny, wouldn't he, if we came right home? He might think we didn't trust him, or something.'

So we went in, and we sat through the second feature and were duly reminded of what life was like—and worse, what death was like—in those distant days a few years ago when Contact didn't exist. When the lights went up briefly between the two pictures I turned to my wife.

'I must say—' I began and broke off short, staring.

He *was* there, right across the aisle from us. I knew it was Mack, not just someone who looked like Mack, because of the way he was trying to duck down into his collar and prevent me from recognising him. I pointed, and my wife's face went absolutely chalk-white.

We started to get to our feet. He saw us, and ran.

I caught him halfway down the block, grabbing his arm and spinning him round, and I said, 'What in hell is this all about? This is just about the dirtiest trick that anyone

ever played on me !'

If anything happened to those kids, of course, that was the end. You couldn't make a Contact for a child till past the age of reading, at the earliest.

And he had the gall to try and argue with me. To make excuses for himself. He said something like, 'I'm sorry, but I got so worried I couldn't stand it any longer. I made sure everything was all right, and I only meant to be out for a little while, and—'

My wife had caught up by now, and she turned it on. I never suspected before that she knew so many dirty words, but she did, and she used them, and she finished up by slapping him across the face with her purse before leading me into a dash for the car. All the way home she was telling me what an idiot I'd been to get tangled up with Mack, and I was saying what was perfectly true—that I did the guy a favour because I didn't think anyone should have to be lonely and without a Contact any more—but true or not it sounded hollow.

The most terrifying sound I ever heard was the noise of those two kids squalling as we came in. But nothing was wrong with either of them except they were lonely and miserable, and we comforted them and made a fuss of them till they quietened down.

The outside door opened while we were breathing sighs of relief and there he was again. Of course, we'd left him a key to the door while we were out, in case he had to step round the corner or anything. Well, a few minutes is one thing—but tracking us to the movie house and then sitting through the show was another altogether.

I was practically speechless when I saw who it was. I let him get the first few words in because of that. He said, 'Please, you must understand ! All I wanted was to make sure nothing happened to you ! Suppose you'd had a crash on the way to the movie, and I didn't know—where would I be then ? I sat here and worried about it till I just couldn't stand any more, and all I meant to do was make sure you were safe, but when I got down to the movie house I got worried about your coming home safe and—'

I still hadn't found any words because I was so blind angry. So, since I couldn't take any more, I wound up and

let him have it on the chin. He went halfway backwards through the open door behind him, catching at the jamb to stop himself falling, and his face screwed up like a mommy's darling who's got in a game too rough for him and he started to snivel.

'Don't drive me away !' he moaned. 'You're the only friend I have in the world ! Don't drive me away !'

'Friend !' I said. 'After what you did this evening I wouldn't call you my friend if you were the last guy on Earth ! I did you a favour and you've paid it back exactly the way Mary said you would. Get the hell out of here and don't try to come back, and first thing in the morning I'm going to stop by at a Contact agency and have you expunged !'

'No !' he shrieked. I never thought a man could scream like that—as though red-hot irons had been put against his face. 'No ! You can't do that ! It's inhuman ! It's—'

I grabbed hold of him and twisted the key out of his fingers, and for all he tried to cling to me and went on blubbering I pushed him out of the door and slammed it in his face.

That night I couldn't sleep. I lay tossing and turning, staring up into the darkness. After half an hour of this, I heard my wife sit up in the other bed.

'What's the trouble, honey ?' she said.

'I don't know,' I said. 'I guess maybe I feel ashamed of myself for kicking Mack out the way I did.'

'Nonsense !' she said sharply. 'You're too soft-hearted. You couldn't have done anything else. Lonely or not lonely, he played a disgusting, wicked trick on us—leaving the twins alone like that after he'd promised ! You didn't promise him anything. You said you were doing him a favour. You couldn't know what sort of a person he'd turn out to be. Now you relax and go to sleep. I'm going to wake you early and make sure of getting you to a Contact agency before you go in to work.'

At that precise moment, as though he'd been listening, I picked him up.

I could never describe—not if I tried for twenty lifetimes—the slimy, underhand, snivelly triumph that was in his mind when it happened. I couldn't convey the

sensation of 'Yah, tricked you again!' Or the undertone of 'You treated me badly, see how badly I can treat you.'

I think I screamed a few times when I realised what had happened. Of course. He'd conned me into making a Contact with him, just as he'd done to a lot of other people before—only they'd seen through him in good time and expunged without telling him, so that when he found out, it was too late to cheat on the deal the way he'd cheated me.

I'd told him I was going to expunge him in the morning—that's a unilateral decision, as they call it, and there wasn't a thing he could do to stop me. Something in my voice must have shown that I really meant it. Because, though he couldn't stop me, he could forestall me, and he'd done exactly that.

He'd shot himself in the heart.

I went on hoping for a little while. I fought the nastiness that had come into my mind—sent my wife and kids off to her parents again over the weekend—and tried to sweat it out by myself. I didn't make it. I was preoccupied for a while finding out exactly how many lies Mack had told me—about his reform school, his time in jail, his undiscovered thefts and shabby tricks played on people he called friends like the one he'd played on me—but then it snapped, and I had to go and call up my father-in-law and find out if my wife had arrived yet, and she hadn't, and I chewed my nails to the knuckle and called up my old friend Hank who said hullo, yes of course I still have your Contact you old so-and-so and how are you and say I may be flying up to New York next weekend—

I was *horrified*. I couldn't help it. I guess he thought I was crazy or at any rate idiotically rude, when I tried to talk him out of flying up, and we had a first-rate argument which practically finished with him saying he'd expunge the Contact if that was the way I was going to talk to an old pal.

Then I panicked and had to call my kid brother Joe, and he wasn't home—gone somewhere for the weekend, my part of my mind told me, and nothing to worry about. But Mack's part of my mind said he was probably dead and my old friend was going to desert me and pretty soon I wouldn't have a Contact at all and then I'd be permanently dead and how about that movie last night with people being

killed and having no Contacts at all ?

So I called my father-in-law again and yes my wife and the twins were there now and they were going on the lake in a boat belonging to a friend and I was appalled and tried to say that it was too dangerous and don't let them and I'd come up myself and hold them back if I had to and—

It hasn't stopped. It's been quite a time blending Mack in with the rest of me ; I hoped and hoped that when the *click* came things would be better. But they're worse.

Worse ?

Well—I can't be sure about that. I mean, it's true that until now I was taking the most appalling risks. Like going out to work all day and leaving my wife at home alone—why, anything might have happened to her ! And not seeing Hank for months on end. And not checking with Joe every chance I got, so that if he was killed I could have time to fix up another Contact to take his place.

It's safer now, though. Now I have this gun, and I don't go out to work, and I don't let my wife out of my sight at all, and we're going to drive very carefully down to Joe's place, and stop him doing foolish things too, and when I've got him lined up we'll go to Hank's and prevent him from making that insanely risky flight to New York and then maybe things will be okay.

The thing that worries me, though, is that I'll have to go to sleep some time, and—what if something happens to them all when I'm asleep ?

—John Brunner

Barrington J. Bayley may sound like the name of some Eminent Victorian, but the young man who owns it is definitely in the 60s. Hiding his light under a bushel of pen-names, Bayley has written for all the British magazines since he was 15. Here's a tale of high adventure, romance and colour among the spaceways—which also has the subtleties of situation and character which modern SF readers demand.

THE STAR VIRUS

Barrington J Bayley

o n e

Ultimatum

THE STUNDAKER SPACEGROUND was a lusty, brawling, untidy sprawl which Rodrone took in with half his attention. He was used to such sights, and now his mind brooded elsewhere.

Rodrone was a tall, spare man. Dark, with a short cropped beard and a mournful countenance, his black cloak flowing behind him in the hot breeze, he fitted well with the boisterous wastrels and adventurers of the space-ground. He moved easily across the rigidified concrete, among stalls, quarreling merchants, and the variegated forms of spaceships which were scattered about, not yet ready to take off and so regarded as fixtures by the ever-shifting populace of the ten-mile 'ground. In his thoughts, he recounted his interview a few minutes ago at the Council Chambers of the Merchant's Guild.

Like most space-adventurers, he held a slightly amused,

slightly respectful attitude towards the Merchant Guilds which constituted the only form of government among the hub worlds. He had been notified to appear before them within half an hour of touch-down, and he knew better than to disobey.

The semi-ruler merchants of Stundaker held sway over the whole of the local cluster, and they were well in league with all the other guilds of man-travelled space in the hub. They presented a richly-bedecked, self-satisfied crew to Rodrone, but he was keenly aware that their apparent smugness veiled a well-informed appreciation of the real nature of the doings of the free traders and hired captains who sustained man's presence in the centre of the galaxy.

He had taken one look at their cosily furs, their apparel whose tailoring would have cost an ordinary man the wages of a lifetime, above all at their gross forms and money-dominated faces, and then had simply waited to hear what they had to say.

Jal-Dee, nominally spokesman, but as Rodrone knew virtually prime minister, spoke first.

'We believe,' Jal-Dee had said, 'that there has come into your possession a certain . . . article, named, by our information the Lens.'

Rodrone scanned their faces, uncertain yet whether they meant him good or harm. 'I have an article fitting that description,' he admitted.

Jal-Dee grunted in satisfaction. 'Glad there's no argument about that, then. The Lens belongs to the Streall. They're demanding it back. I'm afraid you'll have to hand it over.'

Rodrone laughed shortly. He felt no fear of the Guild; he was a freeman, accustomed to behave as he pleased. 'The whole damned lot of you collected just to tell me that?' he said. 'Oh, no. The Lens is mine.'

Jal-Dee sighed heavily and unpleasantly. Another merchant spoke up.

'The Streall's claims are of long standing,' he said in a reedy voice. 'Don't think that we will risk antagonising an alien race—a powerful and hitherto friendly race, I might say—because of the personal greed of a . . . man like yourself.'

Rodrone ignored the semi-insult. 'The Streall's only claim to the Lens,' he told them, 'is that they have been searching for it for the past three millennia. I found it, and that's my good fortune. The Lens never belonged to the Streall. It was made by a race now extinct. It's mine. I found it.'

He stood up, thinking to leave. 'As to the friendliness of the Streall, I've had some experience of them. Besides that, their recent actions would make anyone suspicious.'

Jal-Dee snorted impatiently. 'I know they've taken over systems, Rodrone, but they were ruled by inferior races, not by humans. In any case, we have received their guarantee that they have no further stellar ambitions in the hub. In the face of this, we must recognise their claim to the Lens.'

Rodrone had wanted to laugh even louder at this, but an icy sense had restrained him. As a student of history, certain patterns had meaning to him.

But when he tried to explain where he had heard a similar phrase to the Streall's, none of the merchants had ever heard of Hitler. Unlike them, Rodrone was not reassured by the philosophical character of the Streall; because that philosophy had an alien, uncompromising tang to it. Rodrone did not fully understand it, but it gave him some misgivings in his thoughtful moments.

To the Streall, the humans were also an inferior race. Their disordered, colourful activities in the close-clustered worlds of the hub were regarded as one would regard the playfulness of unruly pets or vermin. Rodrone did not think that the Streall's actions were without a pattern.

'You're afraid,' he taunted the merchants. 'You are trying to appease the Streall. You must stand up to them! We would be a match to the Streall, if we turned our minds to it. And why do you think they want the Lens?'

He paused to let that sink in. 'The Lens has strange properties, gentlemen.'

Jal-Dee became uncomfortable. 'Rodrone, we won't be lectured to by a man like you. We know all about that private little fleet of yours, armed to the teeth. And we've heard some very disturbing reports of piracy in the past few years.'

‘There was no piracy!’ Rodrone expostulated angrily. ‘We simply overhauled cargo ships and forced them to sell at a reasonable price. Would you have us starve?’

‘Never mind.’ Jal-Dee waved his hand but the sudden glint in his eye remained. ‘This is an order: hand over the Lens, and all is well.’

‘The Lens is mine,’ Rodrone repeated. ‘It cost me a lot of effort to come by it, and I have uses for it. You have no proper jurisdiction over me.’

He realised as he said it that the last statement was unwise. But he would not back out now. He stood, pulled on his gloves, tossed aside his cloak to reveal his side-arms meaningfully, and prepared to leave.

Jal-Dee, worth the ransom of a thousand planets, went red. ‘It was an order, you scum!’

The merchant pulled out a file which he had been hiding beneath the table. ‘In here,’ he said ‘is something of your past. We know who we’re dealing with—a waster, a no-good—a Goddamned pirate and a fuzzy-brain!’

This time Rodrone flushed. ‘Fuzzy-brain’ was one of those ambiguous terms—a term of execration in some sectors of society, of grudging praise in others. Rodrone knew that he deserved it in both senses.

He could understand the ruling merchants’ hatred of the unpractical, disorganised dreamers and thinkers who sometimes roved among the boisterous community of free traders and free companions. To the ease and affluence which the merchants loved, they represented a danger—a simple adventurer could be depended on to transport or escort a cargo, and apart from some rowdyism caused little trouble. Thinkers, especially the half-hearted kind like Rodrone, sometimes had schemes and ideals.

He had left the Guildhall in a hurry, still defying the blunt command and he realised that he would have to leave Stundaker soon.

He was honest enough to admit to himself that Jal-Dee’s contempt had stung, even though it was no different from what he should have expected. They had him classified, no doubt, according to their own values, and their estimate of him could hardly be favourable: a brooding, uncertain man, with a doubtful past and doubtful emotions. Not a man to

be trusted, not a man to whose word one attached much importance. It would have been no use to try to impress them with the seriousness which he felt really underlay his nature. It would have been carrying sensitivity a bit too far.

Besides, he thought as little of them as they did of him. In this kind of culture, the only one humanly possible at the hub, the sediment separated out, but the sediment carried all the weight.

He felt more free on the spaceground. Most spacemen shared varying measures of disgust for the overfed detritus which had sunk to the bottom of economic activity, taking untold wealth with it. He might expect sympathy and perhaps help here.

He must get away quickly. There was no knowing how long it would take Jal-Dee to act.

Stundaker's primary blazed down on the spaceground, slightly blue in colour, and with it a scattering of hard points of light glittered from the blue sky : nearby suns of the local cluster, many of them only light-weeks away.

He relaxed, enjoying the bustle around him. Hard-eyed men busied themselves with a multitude of tasks. Here, a bargain was struck, there, a fight was in progress. Further off, a woman in billowing skirts sat by a pile of luggage. About sixty per cent of the men wore side arms—not because violence was particularly prevalent but because it added a flamboyance which was in style. There were literally thousands of ships on the ground, of every size, range and mode of propulsion, and seemingly of every age. It required a second look to realise that some of those outlandish lumps of metal actually were ships.

And above, the stars shone down in brilliant daylight, providing the reason for it all. The hub. The dazzling, star-packed swirl which provided such a plethora of worlds that the concept of 'world' had disappeared from men's lives. Boundaries had not existed for the five hundred years since men came to the hub and realised that here the frontier was never-ending and ever close at hand. The outlying stellar districts of man's origin, where stars are separated by light-years, were forgotten. The hub became man's habitat.

There were a billion places to go, and under such conditions regular authority became impossible. There were no nations. There were no governments not formed by the moguls of interstellar trade. No man could be restrained : he had simply to get up and go. It was a half-civilised age of free men, and there seemed no reason why it should not go on forever.

Rodrone walked by a stubby, streamlined ship which rested on a quartet of vanes each about three times the vessel's breadth and nearly its height. Bowsers were busy pumping into it, and he imagined it was taking aboard water as propellant for an old-fashioned nuclear engine. Interplanetary traffic, most likely. Then he caught a whiff of alcohol. By space, a chemical rocket ! He smiled, amused but not really surprised.

He skirted round the bowsers and started walking towards his own ship, the *Stond*, whose battered hull reared up a quarter of a mile away.

Then he stopped.

Long, low armoured vehicles were parked near the *Stond*, and even from here he could make out the insignia of the house of Jal-Dee. Men, armed and uniformed, stood guard at the portal ramps. They looked as if they were there to stay.

Rodrone stepped casually back, as inconspicuously as possible, until he was hidden by the bowsers again. He trembled with a sudden, sick fury. They were after the Lens.

But the Lens was not aboard the *Stond*. He had brought it to Stundaker in order to spend a few months studying it here, where atomic scientists might be able to discover the principles of its operation for him, and he had already removed it to a hotel in the town which surrounded the spaceground on all sides.

As he stood there he heard the sound of an approaching motor. One of the police cars swept by, containing members of his crew who were struggling angrily with green-uniformed thugs. The driver, taking no notice of the scrimmage in the back of the vehicle, surged across the field at top speed, scattering bystanders and overturning a flimsy stall selling cold drinks.

The muffled, outraged shouts of Rodrone's men faded into the distance. Rodrone pulled his cloak around him, and glowered.

'What's up, you been impounded?'

A mechanic had stepped out of the nearest bowser and was checking meters. He glanced at Rodrone over his shoulder and gave a half-chuckle, half-grunt.

'Well, maybe this old crate won't go far or fast, but at least it's a ship. They might need an extra man.'

Rodrone stalked away without answering. The mechanic had immediately sized up his position, but a glorified fire-work wouldn't take him far enough from Stundaker.

He made his way cautiously to the edge of the 'ground, and then threaded his way through the surrounding town. Any spaceground made for a fast-moving community: most of the buildings of the town were semi-permanent structures made of plastic board, gaudy and in bad taste. Rodrone's hotel was typical: a five-story edifice deriving its structural strength from an external scaffolding. Inside, however, it was fairly pleasant.

He took a lift to the fourth floor and let himself into the suite he had rented. Clave looked round as he entered.

'How's things?' he said. When Clave spoke, it was always in a tone of unwavering cynicism.

'Bad.' Rodrone related what had happened.

Clave showed no sign of surprise or alarm, though he probably felt it. He was a young man—about twenty-five—with a quick body which gave the impression of calm, limitless energy. His face was broad and pale, and his flaxen, almost colourless hair was combed back behind his ears to spread out carelessly over his shoulders. His eyes were very striking, with a staring quality, and his lips were habitually drawn back in a sinister half-grin. But for his obvious health and liveliness, one would have taken him to be consumptive.

His movements were easy and spare. He would take an interest in anything, or dare anything, the more outlandish the better. It was this utter readiness which gave him his appearance of inner strength.

Rodrone liked him because, despite Clave's own belief to

the contrary, he was completely ingenuous.

Clave made a gesture, crossing the room. 'I've been looking at this thing while you were out. It's great.'

Rodrone joined him and looked down at the object positioned in one corner of the room. For not one second since he had found it—or, indeed, since he had heard of it seven months before that, and followed up some information given him by a dying non-human—had he been able to tear his mind away from the fascination of it.

The Lens . . . In the Guildhall had been the first time he had heard the term used. Previously he had had no name for his find. The Lens was a flawless, crystal-clear cylinder four feet across and three feet thick. It was made of a beautifully smooth material, not any plastic that Rodrone knew of, but similar to ancient glass. Rodrone always took great care in transporting it, for he thought that it might in fact be glass, which he had heard was breakable. In the centre of the Lens was a glowing swirl of energy, which sometimes seemed to move, though he was never sure. But it was in the encircling limpid parts that the fascination lay.

Visions appeared there. Scenes and dramas of an endless variety, both within and beyond the reach of Rodrone's imagination, sprang to life and played themselves out. Not one of them was ever non-descript or mediocre, and each one always had a clearly defined beginning and an end—though the time-periods would vary between a minute or two and one which had been in progress in a particular sector of the Lens ever since he had acquired it.

Rodrone had no idea of the antiquity of the Lens though it must be very ancient, but he had discounted the idea that it was merely an alien version of a fictional picture show. The playlets seemed too authentic for that, fantastic though they were. He was convinced that they represented actual events.

He believed that the glowing swirl represented the hub of the galaxy—Thiswirl, to give it the title which had superseded the archaic term Milky Way—the hub being the most energetic component of the whole stellar system. The visions were random selections of things and happenings from the teeming life of that hub, only a fraction of which

had felt man's influence as yet.

Nothing had ever thrilled Rodrone so much. He studied history : history not only of the past but in its future aspect as well. He could not explain the feeling that came over him when he thought of the innumerable suns hissing in that condensation from which the spirals radiated, pouring electromagnetic energy into black space. As far as mankind went, he felt in the development of sciences and the corresponding development of interstellar adventures, a significance which he never spoke of, not even in his own mind. He never vocalised it, because he couldn't grasp it. It was just a vague undercurrent to his thoughts—a feeling.

Now, he had the Lens, and, he believed, if he could find the key, the understanding to past and future. The glowing swirl in the centre of that glassy object must be a *plan* : a plan of the hub, copied star for star. Possibly, each emitting atom was a sun.

Rodrone had wanted to instill himself with scientific knowledge, but his mind was too ephemereal for the concentrated study involved. He had an inkling, however, of what a man deeply versed in current technology might make of that glowing swirl.

The science of inciting atoms was very ancient, beginning with the utilisation of electricity over two thousand years ago. Even now, electronics was the basis of nearly all control systems, but in addition other atomic particles, and whole atoms, themselves were induced to agitate, to migrate, to change places instantaneously, to give up scores of different kinds of energies and effects. Rodrone doubted if the engineer or physicist lived who knew everything that was being done with atomic science, for there were no such things as professors or academicians these days. Whatever a man did, he did on his own or with whatever help was handy and interested, but there was no possibility of gaining academic recognition—orthodoxy had disappeared.

If Rodrone was right, the Lens contained the ultimate use of the atomic world, implying absolute knowledge.

It was no wonder that the Streall wanted it, but why they wanted it was a matter that kept Rodrone guessing in cold fear. He had had some contact with them in the past, and knew that human terms just did not apply. Their science

was like a philosophy, their philosophy was like a science : and it was this remorseless philosophic basis of theirs which sometimes made Rodrone sweat. They had no thought for themselves, but they had an irrevocable commitment to what they thought to be right. It was a logical clarity verging on madness.

Rodrone knew how powerful a philosophy could be, even when it was wrong. It was the scientific, hard-fact nature of Streall thinking which scared him. They could only be right.

Unlike a Streall, a human being would carry on in his own way irrespective of whether he was right or not. Rodrone felt himself to be very human.

'What makes those Guild creeps so keen on making a present of this gadget ?' Clave asked, looking at Rodrone sidewise.

'Appeasement. Most people don't realise how the Streall regard us, Clave. We're something on the level of domestic animals, or perhaps vermin, who scurry about their own business but are tolerated. The merchants *do* know this, but it suits them. They're rich, so why should they worry ? The result is, they don't want trouble.'

He glanced at the slanting sunlight. 'We've got to get away from here. As soon as it's dark I'll go back to the 'ground and try to get us passage on a ship. You'd better stay here.'

'What about the rest of the gang ?'

'We can't do anything for them without losing the Lens. They won't be harmed. Jal-Dee will have to let them go eventually and they can take the *Stond* back to the squadron.'

They spent the rest of the afternoon without talking much. Rodrone gazed at himself in a mirror, intrigued as usual by his own soft, mournful brown eyes. Was he an unusually strong man, or an unusually weak one ? He had never been able to decide. True, he was given some sort of allegiance by enough men to man a whole squadron of ill-assorted ships, but that was no criterion. Men of their sort tended to congregate round the most unlikely character available.

t w o

Escape

ACTIVITY ON THE spaceground underwent no abatement at night, but there were plenty of shadows and if anything it was even more crowded. Rodrone did not think he would have to worry much about being arrested unless he was careless; the local police would not dare to throw too much weight about in the presence of freemen from all over the hub.

Of the first ten captains he approached, seven were not going his way and the other three laughed at him when he mentioned an item of luggage which had to be loaded in secret. News had got around.

The eleventh captain was more promising. To begin with he was not particularly sober. Rodrone judged him to be approaching sixty years of age, but he seemed to have stopped maturing mentally about fifty of those years ago, and as a child he must have been uncontrollable. Rodrone had met men of his type before and he got on well with them. His face was cragged and seamed, surmounted by unkempt tufts of greying hair. He wore no uniform, but the individual dress of a free trader.

He cordially invited Rodrone up to his quarters and poured him out a glass of pale blue *foment*. 'Name's Shone,' he said. 'Gael Shone. This ship's called the *Stator*. A fine ship—got her just recently, damned cheap too.' He drained his glass, offered Rodrone more *foment* then poured himself another. 'What can I do for you?'

'I'm heading for the Ptelter Cluster. I want passage for myself, a friend, and a small cargo. We'll pay well, if you're leaving soon.'

'Dammit, we're leaving tonight, but Ptelter's a bit out of our way. We've got a cargo for Tithe.'

Rodrone rose to leave, nodding in disappointment. 'I see. Well, sorry to have bothered you.'

'Hey, wait a minute.' Shone waved him back to his seat. 'What's doing in Ptelter? Anything I can cash in on? There's no hurry with our delivery and we've got no more work.'

‘Nothing special, but we can manage.’

‘Yes? What’s the cargo, anyhow?’

Rodrone became tight-lipped. ‘That’s a secret.’

Shone cackled in delight. ‘I thought so!’ He leaned forward. ‘Trouble with the Guild, eh?’

Rodrone took a chance. He nodded.

‘Good,’ the captain said in satisfaction. ‘I hate those swines. They took your ship apart by the beams, incidentally.’

‘I didn’t know that.’

‘Yup. Well they did. Whatever they wanted, they wanted it bad.’

‘It’s no use to anybody but me.’

Shone studied him. ‘Well, I can believe that. Ptelter’s quite a few degrees off course for us, Mister, but we’ll detour for fifty thousand credits.’

Rodrone lost his breath at the exorbitant fee; the decision was out of his hands, however. ‘I’ll pay at the other end,’ he said. ‘You can’t expect me to carry that money in my pocket.’

‘I’ll trust you.’ Gael Shone stood up. ‘Welcome aboard then, Rodrone. You’ll like it here—my crew are good lads, some of them have been with me for years. Now, if we’re going to get off Stundaker in one piece we’ll have to move fast. Jebby will go with you in our runabout, and you can collect this thing of yours together with your mate. Then we’ll be off.’ He lowered his voice warningly. ‘I’ve heard the Guild are asking ’ground owners for a ship to ship search.’

Jebby, a small dark man who was also dapper and rat-faced, met them at ground level by the cargo portal—situated where the drive unit was in most ships. Shone waved them goodbye as they drove off in the runabout, and then disappeared inside.

Although there had not been time for Shone to say more than a few cursory words to Jebby, he nevertheless seemed to be imbued with the urgency of the situation. Rodrone guessed that it was his usual mode of operation. He leaned tensely forward over the steering bar, darting through the semi-darkness and too intent to say a word.

It was not until they burst in on Clave that the spacer spoke. Clave lifted his lank form off the couch where it had been draped, took a look at Rodrone and a more absorbed one at Jebby.

‘Okay,’ Jebby rasped, his eyes darting about. ‘Is that it? Throw a blanket over it and let’s get it out.’

It was Rodrone and Clave who carried the Lens carefully, herded and snapped at by Jebby all the time. Rodrone felt glad at his efficiency—he had been well-trained as a criminal, somewhere—as they bore the clumsy blanket-draped object through the brightly lighted foyer and onto the street. Soon they were hurtling back to the ‘ground, Rodrone anxious for the safety of the Lens which was bouncing dangerously in the back.

They arrived at the spaceground to find that a situation had developed which must have been in the making all the afternoon. The police had begun the search, and a group of three ships were resisting. Enfiladed by police cars, the ships were answering an attack by rifles and handguns with similar fire. Rodrone noticed a heavy-weapons blister halfway up one of the ships. It wouldn’t be long, he thought before the spacemen became angry enough to resort to that.

The spaceground was in an uproar. They were nearly deafened by the sound of engines—some of the ships on the ‘ground were warming up to lift off if the trouble spread.

‘What the hell—’

Jebby swerved round a bunch of excited crewmen who were slapping their hip holsters and handing out energy charges. The runabout drove through a blast of hot gases from the pre-take-off vent of an interplanetary freighter, and then they were in sight of the *Stator*. Jebby accelerated for the final lap across open ground, nearly crushing them with his sudden stop at the cargo portal.

‘Get it in,’ he ordered briefly.

‘Look at that!’ Clave said suddenly.

The three besieged ships were lifting, a magnesium-bright haze at the stern of each. They were using the maximum-force propulsion system — maximum force, minimum deadweight, was how engineers described it, and it took from half an hour to an hour to ready the system for use. The battle must have been going on for at least

that long, even though few had been aware of it.

A uniformed figure strode up and spoke to Jebby through the open window. 'Everybody out of this car,' he said. 'This is a search.'

Jebby took a small handgun from an alcove in the dashboard—and shot him.

'Now get a move on,' he snapped to the two men in the back. He opened the car door, kicking aside the body.

As they were transferring the Lens from the runabout, an amplified voice rang out.

'SHIP SEARCH, SHIP SEARCH. LOWER YOUR PORTALS AND PRESENT FOR SEARCH. LOWER YOUR PORTALS AND—HEY, YOU THERE !'

'Hurry up with it !' Jebby snarled impatiently, his words clipped. He still did not offer to help, but slammed shut the door of the runabout. 'Now we shall have to leave the car behind.'

The police voice continued, off-stage as though the speaker had turned his head away from the microphone. Rodrone did not allow himself time to see where the voice was coming from.

'LIEUTENANT, I THINK I'VE FOUND IT ! THEY'RE TAKING SOMETHING ABOARD THAT BIG BUS OVER THERE.' Then there was a gasp. 'THEY'VE KILLED STOLLY !'

There was the howl of a siren and the sound of running feet. A huge, beefy man appeared at the entrance of the cargo portal and reached down, almost tearing the Lens from Rodrone's hands and hauling it inboard. Taking Rodrone's arm, he pulled him in after it.

Rodrone winced as the Lens clanged to the floor. A gunshot splattered white-hot metal from the side of the portal. Then the lid descended, cutting them off from the confusion of the spaceground.

Gael Shone's voice boomed from a loudspeaker set high on the wall. 'What news down there ? 2'

'All aboard, chief,' the beefy man called.

'Fine !' Shone's voice rolled. 'Then off we go !'

Rodrone fancied he heard a faint *thwang*, but there was no sensation of acceleration and none of the expected engine noise. Jebby started climbing up a ladder.

'Here we are, gentlemen,' the loudspeaker continued. 'Five hundred miles aloft, gathering speed and heading out. The captain invites his passengers for a short drink in the control gallery—see you when you're ready.'

The loudspeaker clicked. Rodrone raised his eyebrows at the beefy man, who shrugged and led them up a side passage.

The interior of the *Stator* was not without character, of an austere, depressing kind. Its inner construction was mainly of a metal identical in appearance to pig iron, and it consisted of holds and galleries, connected and surrounded by corridors and ledges, many protected from a steep drop only by flimsy railings. It was the most monochrome environment Rodrone could imagine: the lighting was stark, and there was not a scrap of colour anywhere. The whole effect reminded Rodrone strongly of a prison he had seen on the Frozen Continent of Bofor.

The control gallery, the centre of Captain Shone's life, was no different. It was oblong, forty feet long, fifteen feet wide and fifteen feet tall, and it was cold. A control desk stretching nearly the length of the gallery was its main item of furniture, though trophies, weapons and clothing hung on the walls, and Rodrone noticed that the ceiling possessed a purely ornamental scrollwork in black iron, without doubt the only decoration on the entire ship. A mattress and a heap of blankets were thrown in one corner.

One item in the control gallery, however, was of particular interest to Rodrone. It was located on the wall directly behind the console desk, so that the ship's controller could see it only if he twisted round to look behind him.

At first glance it appeared to be a tunnel, or cavity inset in the wall, filled with an eerie light, or perhaps an illuminated sculpture.

But a few seconds scrutiny convinced him that it was in fact a picture of remarkable depth. The picture represented space for perhaps a hundred light years around. By some miracle of ingenuity it managed to scale down distances, yet fit into the space a sizeable representation of each star—and hold it in proper relationship as the ship moved.

The effect, of drawing together masses of suns already close in terms of astronomical distances, was remarkable.

The assembly seemed endowed with design and calculation. It was like a building for the gods, or like a great glowing machine.

The stars shone from the cavity with a hard steely light : but they seemed to hold back all kinds of tints and hues which glimmered beneath the outward appearance. It was a deep show of hidden colour—the nearest thing to colour itself aboard the *Stator*.

Captain Gael Shone, seated on the main throne of the console desk, favoured them with a bleary, dark-eyed smile. He had already set out three glasses in front of him.

‘Come and fill up, friends, and damn all police and planet-bound trash, eh?’ He laughed.

He noticed Rodrone staring at the picture behind him. ‘You like my little indicator? I use it for navigation.’

‘It’s magnificent,’ Rodrone murmured.

‘Yeah, you can’t see ’em, but the whole lot’s just crawling with men, like disease viruses in a golden palace.’

Rodrone smiled at the colourful metaphor, but he was struck by the image. He’s right, he thought. We don’t have any rightful place there. Even the stars obey celestial dynamics, but we’re all for lawlessness.

He shrugged. ‘I like it that way.’

‘So do I.’ Shone poured drinks.

Rodrone tore his eyes away from the picture. ‘Well, you’re expensive, Shone, but you did a good job,’ he complimented. ‘Thanks. What kind of drive do you use, by the way? I never heard of a completely silent technique before.’

‘No thunder of the rockets in this outfit!’ Shone agreed. He turned his attention to Clave. ‘I’ve met your boss, but I haven’t been introduced to you yet. What’s your name?’

‘Clave Theory.’

‘Of the old Theory family?’ Shone looked interested. Clave nodded, keeping his fixed glassy smile.

‘Glad to have somebody aboard who comes from such a notable line. Old John Theory and his sons did great things for science, even if they did throw it in too many directions. He was a fine man. Still, that was some time ago, and I guess the family’s scattered since then . . . he was uneducated, that was his trouble.’

Clave did not alter his expression. 'It has scattered,' he agreed.

Rodrone took the proffered glass of *foment* and sipped it. 'How long do you estimate for the trip?' he asked.

'About two weeks, subjective ship time.'

'What about Jal-Dee? We might be pursued.'

'Why then, we man the blisters! A *foment* ration for every man, the death sentence for the first who takes his finger off the firing stud.' Shone chuckled lengthily. 'Actually, the big fat merchants aren't keen enough to chase us. They'll simply tell the Streall we got away and then forget it. It's the Streall we shall have to watch for.'

A silence descended, and all at once the atmosphere became calmer. Shone looked at Rodrone steadily, taking a pull on his drink. He shifted his feet to a higher ledge on the fronting of his desk and leaned back.

'You know what's up with you?' he said suddenly, addressing Rodrone. 'You're haunted. Haunted! It's in your face. You were born with it. An incurable desire to follow up and find out, that's your trouble. You just can't let go, can you?'

Rodrone felt uncomfortable, but once he had decided not to answer the captain, he felt strangely relaxed.

Shone coughed. 'You feel things too much.' His moment of personal penetration had passed, now. 'You ought to live just for whatever comes to hand, like me.'

The remark made Rodrone meditative. Later, when the conversation between the three of them had reached a deeper degree of congeniality, and a great deal of *foment* had been drunk, he asked gently:

'Have you happened on a planet called Sunder recently?'

'Sunder?'

'It's Land V. I've got a wife there. I haven't seen her for five years.'

'You don't look like a wife-deserter to me. How come she doesn't move with you?'

Rodrone shrugged. Men who spent a lot of time in space generally kept their wives with them, specially in view of the time-dilation effect of interstellar voyaging, but he never had. 'Just didn't get round to it,' he answered simply.

He made no attempt to explain further, but in fact that

was as close to the truth as he could get. It wasn't as if he and his wife didn't need each other—they did. But they had an attunement with one another, a free kind of attitude to one another, which obviated the need to be continually in each other's presence. Just the knowledge that the other existed somewhere in the hub was enough.

It would have been impossible, he knew, but for their unquestioning fidelity to one another.

'Sunder,' Shone repeated. 'That's a strange kind of name.'

'Yeah.' Rodrone turned away. Most planets—many stars, for that matter—had names connected with their history, and he did not feel like going into his home world's now. It was a familiar enough story, in any case, of an emigrant fleet reaching an unknown star after considerable hardship, only to quarrel violently, with consequences of disastrous war, when they reached safety.

He felt tempted to hire Captain Shone to make a further detour to the nearby Land system and pick up his wife. It would make a difference of about nine months, Objective Galactic Time, and a few weeks by subjective ship time. But time was one thing he did not wish to waste.

His intention now was to rejoin the squadron which was cruising somewhere in Ptelter, and then continue with his study of the Lens. He did not think he could learn much more from it on his own : he had already spent a year with it, and he was clearly getting nowhere by just watching its fascinating dramas. He had to find help, in order to read in it the pattern of history ; but next time he sought that help he intended to take the protection of the squadron with him.

Rodrone could not believe that the developments and doings of living races were incapable of being scientifically treated. He was convinced that historical processes could be put on the same firm basis as physics or chemistry. Like the ultimate particles of matter, it had to have its causes, origins and intrinsic properties. When this idea had first dawned in Rodrone's mind, a fantastically simple, apposite guide to his actions had come to him, like a formula to guide a man's life.

A man could either be an adventurer, taking what came

and ready to take on more, or he could be an investigator and try to discover where it came from. Rodrone thought of himself as the latter, though he had always known the company of men of the former type. The only alternative to either of these two was to stagnate, becoming more and more dull-minded according to the time and place. In this category were the bonded servants of the big merchants who contributed little to society themselves but exercised power even in places where their richly-shod feet never trod, and took an enormous tax in landing fees and trading licences. Rodrone scarcely ever thought of these servants and sycophants. They were like beasts of burden.

And the Streall? Why had they sought the Lens so penetratingly and for so long? Did they also seek the answers to the same questions which burned in Rodrone's mind? Rodrone thought that they did, but he was apprehensive of another, inhuman purpose behind their quest.

In the next few days Rodrone and Clave had no choice but to fraternise with the crew; their boisterous, semi-violent ways precluded reclusiveness.

There was a weirdness about them that Rodrone couldn't place at first. There was Jebby, completely without humour, methodical, and with the intentness of a pervert. There was Jublow, an ungainly man with a brick-red bull-neck and a little-boy enthusiasm for the rough-neck entertainments they all indulged in. And so on to unsmiling, melancholiac Krat, Pim, coarse and caustic, and others, about ten in all. They had the unity of a gang, but there was the same seedy, unhealthy aura about them all. Their eyes never really seemed to live, but to peer.

The only one who seemed in a brighter state of health was Feeldonet, the beefy man who had helped Rodrone at the portal, and apparently he was new.

Captain Shone ruled over them all like a well-meaning bully. He rarely joined in their more frenetic activities, such as the frenzied dancing and the rapid-fire target practices. Usually he sat back and watched, a bottle of *foment* leaning against one shoulder, smiling genially.

On the third day the crewmen carried the Lens up to the control gallery from where Rodrone had parked it in his own

quarters. He flushed angrily at first, but they were unruly and in an advanced state of merriment, and Shone gave no indication that he intended to control them. Every one on board was in the party except Clave, who had gone off by himself to star-gaze in one of the weapons blisters.

The Lens slammed to the floor as the men released their burden. There was a scuffle for a few moments as they all tried to find a good vantage point around it, then suddenly Pim seemed to assume command.

‘Let’s see some pretty pictures,’ he said.

They fell momentarily silent and gawped open-mouthed. To be honest with himself, Rodrone couldn’t blame them for not keeping their hands off it. In this frigid ship anything new was an attraction and the Lens was certainly a stunner.

Pim pressed his nose flat against the surface of the Lens. Then he stood up, and tried to mark the glossy finish with a knife. ‘I want to see some space-battles.’

‘Yeah!’ they all chorused.

‘There’s no control over it,’ Rodrone informed stonily. ‘The scenes are all random.’

‘Aw.’ Pim screwed up his face. ‘You’d think—here y’are, then, what’s this comin’ up? Eh, it looks good!’

Rodrone looked, shouldering the others aside. Pim was right: from the centre, a region of blackness was spreading towards the periphery. In it, ships appeared, rectilinear rods, black as space itself but shiny, and partitions slid aside in them. The ships were fighting one another, directing energy and missiles through the openings and glinting inwardly with the urgency of contention.

It was as compelling and alien a sight as the Lens had ever produced.

‘Look!’ moored Jublow. ‘There’s another one.’

On the opposite side of the Lens, wedge-shaped vessels stood out against a brilliant globular star cluster. They seemed to be fighting over the possession of a nearby planet, and were warding one another off by creating fields of faint blue nimbus. Rodrone could almost hear them humming and crackling.

‘How did you do it?’ he demanded sharply.

‘Do what?’

‘How did you control the visions?’

‘Who says I did?’

‘I’ve never been able to get the pictures I wanted from it.’

Pim cackled. ‘You ought to come down with us and play our little game, mate, and you’ll know what wishing for things can do. I swear I’ve held that pile down by sheer damned will-power more than once!’

He looked round for approbation as an applause of chuckles and sniggers broke out.

Captain Shone laughed out loud. ‘You’re surprised too often, old pal,’ he remonstrated to Rodrone. ‘You want to be more flexible. If old John Theory was here, now, nothing would ever phase him.’ He took a swig and spluttered. ‘There was a mind for you.’

Rodrone swung round, a suspicion flowering into bare fact in hardly more time than it took for it be to born.

‘You *knew* him.’

‘Of course I did.’

So that was it. Captain Gael Shone had been personally acquainted with Clave’s distant relative, a man whose very family name had changed because of his scientific contributions, and who had lived two hundred years before. With that one datum everything clicked into place.

Now he knew what sort of a ship he had bought a passage on. These were men who would take cargoes on the long hauls across hundreds of light-years, where the time-dilation effect ensured that they could never return to the generation from which they departed. They were the most abandoned of men. They were called deadliners, because their utter removal from the warmth of human society gave them a close affinity with death. They no longer had the ordinary reasons which made a man want to stay alive: they had nothing but their existence in this mausoleum of a freighter.

Eventually the deadliners grew tired of the Lens and wandered off together, leaving Shone asleep at the control desk.

Rodrone sat moodily for a few minutes, then felt restless. The atmosphere of the deadliner ship made him more agitated than usual. He got up and explored sternwards.

The *Stator* was in complete silence. The galleries echoed his footsteps and the walls felt rusty to his touch. Near to where he believed the propulsion unit and power plant to be, he saw a yellow light and heard the murmur of voices.

The crew of the *Stator* were sitting on the floor of a small room, playing cards. One wall of the room was covered with the control mechanisms of a nuclear reactor of some antiquity, to judge by the design. The attitude of the deadliners was one of intense concentration. Rodrone had never seen them so quiet.

Pim laid down a card on the pack and moved forward a counter on a board by his side. 'Check,' he said.

Someone got up and pulled a handle on the wall. Rodrone knew what he was doing. He was withdrawing one of the damper rods.

Jebby looked up as he entered. 'You come to join us?'

'What's the game?'

'Brag. Half skill, half chance.'

Rodrone nodded to the wall. 'And what about the reactor? What sort is it?'

'It's a fast one. It becomes a bomb without the moderators.'

He swallowed. There was no need to ask how it fitted into the game.

Pim noticed his discomfort. 'Whassamatter? We were playing the time you came aboard.'

'What? You mean you played this mad game aground on Stundaker?'

'Sure.'

'But you might have taken half the spaceground with you!'

'The whole of it mate. This is a fair old reactor we've got here. Well, shall I deal you a hand?'

Rodrone sat down as Jublow shifted over. 'Yeah, what the Hell . . .'

As the game progressed, Rodrone picked up the details of it. It was a game in which there were no gains, only one ultimate loss. As the scores mounted, so the reactor's moderator rods were withdrawn; the idea was to win by beating all other opponents while the scores were still low

enough to come out alive, and that needed both skill and luck.

The deadliners called the game Brag, but this version would have been better renamed Dare. In a showdown, the scores of all the hands were added, and the leading player who forced the showdown could rarely be sure of what the other players held.

It was rather like the game of pistol roulette which Rodrone had once seen, where each player took a chance that the heat charge he fired at his head was not the one in five which was actually live. But in this game, no one put down any money. The stakes were purely negative. And why should they not be? Rodrone thought. In a way, these men were dead already.

There was one final grisly touch of murder, to prevent the play from becoming spurious. A player in a winning position who lost his nerve and tried to back out paid a forfeit, by being locked in the cavity behind the reactor's shielding. Rodrone did not know if there were currently any bodies there.

He played cautiously and well, but the others were experts. One by one the rods moved out, occasionally one being pushed back in as the score dropped momentarily. Suddenly he was aware of someone else standing in the entrance.

Clave had also been attracted by the light. He stepped in, taking in the scene with one glance round.

'Brag, eh? I'm good at it.'

There was hardly a word spoken as he took a place and accepted a hand. Rodrone started, and almost rose. Did the youngster realise what he had walked in on? He started to voice a warning, but the heavy dead ethic of the deadliners fell down on him like a stifling blanket, damming the impulse.

To judge by the quick and easy way in which Clave ran up a good score, he had not given a thought to what the stakes were. The deadliners became very tense: Rodrone could almost see them thinking 'this is it.'

After about half an hour, however, the significance of the manipulations of the reactor controls gradually seeped in on Clave. He studied his hand, still sinister of aspect and

smiling, but, Rodrone knew, very thoughtful.

This must be it, Rodrone told himself. Apart from the fact that Clave ran up a high score without knowing what he was doing, they don't scale down to account for there being two extra players.

'Yeah,' said Clave slightly breathless-sounding. 'Well, this has gone far enough.' He laid down his cards.

'You can't do that, mister,' Krat, the melancholiac, informed dourly.

'But dammit—' Clave glanced at the radiation meter, which was glowing brightly. 'Just look at it already.'

'It's hot in there,' Jebby agreed. Briefly, he explained about the forfeit.

Clave gave Rodrone a wild look. 'Are you in on this?'

'It's the rules, Clave!' Rodrone said in a tortured voice.

Clave jumped up. 'You're not putting me in there—'

In an instant the others were on him. Clave's hair swung around his shoulders as they lifted him off his feet. Rodrone leaped forward to put a stop to it, but he was cuffed back.

Then it was done. A thick section of wall swung open. A narrow passage opened up behind, and into this Clave was stuffed, between the two reactor casings. The heavy door slammed shut.

Rodrone was in a state of stunned horror. The deadliners stood around silently, peering at one another with shifty faces.

Suddenly they broke out into one of their spontaneous dancing sessions, thumping the floor with enthusiastic exertions. From somewhere musical instruments were produced, and three of their number filled the room with surprisingly expert swing music. Energetically, they all danced. Jublow danced, his huge hunched shoulders twisting back and forth and his red neck straining. Even Jebby joined in, snake-like, his back crouched and his face intent and deadpan. In all of them, their faces seemed corpse-like, out of place with the convulsions of their bodies.

Rodrone left, and made his way back to the control gallery. Shone had woken up, and was staring blearily into nothing.

Rodrone sat down. 'They've just killed Clave,' he said dully.

‘Killed him? How?’

Rodrone explained.

Shone looked regretful. ‘He was a likeable lad.’

The epitaph struck Rodrone forcibly. He grunted in disgust. ‘Have you got nothing to say for those murdering bully-boys of yours?’

‘Eh? Hah! So you’re complaining.’ Shone stuck his thumb over his shoulder to indicate the picture cavity behind him, with its closely-drawn together designs of suns. ‘Remember what you said? You said you liked it like this. Lawlessness. Disorder! Well, this is it!’ He leaned forward, peering at Rodrone. ‘The way things are, anything can happen in this universe. Some good things, some bad, some pretty ghastly. But who are you to set a limit on what should happen in the whole cosmos?’

Rodrone stared sullenly at him for a long moment. He slumped. Then he grunted again, this time with a hint of grudging humour. ‘Tell me,’ he said. ‘Why do you seem a bit more human than the rest—and yet you still stick with them?’

For answer, Shone flicked a switch. On a small vision plate something appeared.

This time it was not the artificially condensed image which glowed behind him. It was a vaster view, more like what the naked eye would see.

‘Just look at that.’

Rodrone saw—suns. Billions of suns, congregated in piling clouds and clusters. Space edged black between them.

‘That’s excuse enough for anything,’ Shone said.

‘Then we’re brothers under the skin,’ Rodrone said, laughing shortly.

Shone flicked off the vision plate. ‘Business acquaintances, anyway. The Streall arc on to us. I’ve detected them coming up fast—three or four ships. I think we’d better slip out of the way.’

He climbed down from the throne and walked unsteadily to one end of the desk, where he made an adjustment. Then he came back and began to work with the controls.

After a minute or two concern showed on his face. ‘Something’s wrong.’

He continued working for about another minute, and then spoke into a communicator.

‘Feeldonet!’ he bellowed.

A voice answered. ‘Yep?’

‘The drive’s acting up. It doesn’t work! Fix it will you?’

‘Right.’

Shone glanced at Rodrone. ‘It’ll mean a pitched battle if they catch up with us, but we mount some pretty powerful weapons on this ship.’

Half an hour later, Feeldonet came up to the control gallery. He was embarrassed. Somewhat diffidently, he explained how fluctuations in the power supply—caused by tampering with the reactor—had disturbed the drive and thrown it out of action. Then he described his efforts to put it right, and his failure.

Then he admitted that he knew nothing about the drive in question.

Rodrone was amazed. ‘Is this your ship’s engineer?’ he said to the captain.

Shone sighed, ‘I took him on a couple of stops back. He seemed good enough, and he certainly put up a good case for himself. You gulled me!’ he said accusingly to Feeldonet.

Feeldonet shifted his feet. ‘All right, it’s true I’d never heard of this system before, but I’m a good technician and I thought there wasn’t anything I couldn’t get the hang of. Well, I won’t be so cocksure again.’

Rodrone questioned him, intrigued. He had travelled under dozens of different space propulsion systems: numerous sophistications of the reaction-mass principle, ‘space-compression,’ and even once on the new drover engines. But of them all, the method which the *Stator* used was the most bizarre. The mathematics which described it made no reference to motion at all—Feeldonet did not think that they made any reference even to the ship. Consideration was given to the surrounding matter in space, viewed from various separated points. Somehow, the ship was hauled from one to another of these points, by means of a change of observer, as it were.

It was as close a practical application of sheer metaphysics as Rodrone was ever likely to see.

'Now you know why the ship was cheap,' the engineer told Shone. 'Only three of these units were ever built. Just after you gave me the job, a fellow told me that was because there were only ever three technicians who understood it.'

Shone looked at a suddenly winking screen before him.

'Well, keep trying. We've got trouble on our hands.'

Rodrone peered over his shoulder. On the screen, three long, angular Streall ships flashed into existence.

The Streall had not come with hostile intentions, but Rodrone insisted that they be fought off, and the deadliners were quick and eager.

Rodrone retired to one end of the gallery during the battle. A moodiness was coming over him, more profound than anything he had felt before. He realised that the death of Clave had shaken him, but in fact his thoughts were on other matters.

Captain Shone stooped intently over the desk console. The sounds of searing shots from the heavy weapons came from the distant parts of the ship. Then there was a shuddering crash as the Streall returned the fire.

The *Stator* shook and buckled. Captain Shone hung on to his quivering desk with one hand, manipulating controls with the other and giving orders through the intercom at the same time. There came another, heavier crash which caused the control gallery to keel over and almost toppled Shone from his seat. Rodrone glanced up, and even from this distance he knew that Shone was sweating.

The frequency of the *Stator's* firing increased. The flat hoarse sounds of the big guns echoed almost desperately through the metal and air of the ship.

Rodrone began to feel concern. He climbed to his feet. 'How is it going?' he called. The floor vibrated under him as the Streall scored another hit.

The magnificent navigation picture behind Shone winked suddenly out.

It was followed by all the lights in the control room, including those on the desk console.

Captain Shone shouted and cursed in the darkness. The noises of battle continued. Rodrone decided to take no

interest until the outcome was known, and he dropped his head and let his mind drift to other thoughts.

He was still in that revery a quarter of an hour later when the lights came on again. Soon Shone grinned down at him.

'Come out of your sulk. We've won. They were patrol craft—there must be Streall systems nearby. What's more, we've got a prisoner.'

He learned that Jebby, rigging a space-raft from an emergency rocket motor, had crossed over to the wreck of one of the alien vessels and had brought back a member of the crew. Rodrone stepped forward as they herded it into the control gallery.

It had a long armadillo-like body and a broad, pointed snout. Natural skirts of hide reached from its sides to the ground so that it seemed to glide along, but Rodrone knew that beneath the skirts were six legs and a pair of arms which folded underneath its chest.

Its sapphire eyes regarded Rodrone, then swung to the Lens which still lay on the floor of the control gallery.

'So it is true,' it said, speaking the language faultlessly. 'You have it.'

Rodrone nodded.

'And what do you intend to do with it?'

Rodrone had no qualms about revealing his purpose. 'I intend to understand it.'

'How?'

'There must be a way. I have been trying to find someone to help me unravel its nature.'

An explosive sound came from the Streall, like a cat's sneeze. 'Ridiculous. That is only for Streall.'

'What?' Then *you* understand it?' Rodrone became excited.

'I? Of course not. I am only a drive engineer on a patrol ship. The Lens is completely understood only on the Contemplation Worlds.'

Rodrone became agitated. It had already occurred to him that the secrets of the Lens might be beyond the ingenuity of the human intellect to uncover. And if that were so, then any risk would be worthwhile.

'You must return the Lens to us,' the Streall said. 'It rightfully belongs to us for our use.'

'I intend to keep it.'

'It is of no use to you.'

Rodrone said: 'If I can only understand what its uses are, that would be enough.'

'For that you must go to the Contemplation Worlds.' The Streall sank to the floor, like a Sphinx, its skirts spreading round it. 'If that is all you want, the philosopher there will tell you. Then you will give it up.'

'Not necessarily.'

'There will be no choice. Ships will be arriving soon. They will follow you there, to the nearby Contemplation World, and take the Lens from you. If you do not go, you will never discover its nature.'

'This is crazy,' Captain Shone broke in. 'He's trying to lead you into a trap.'

'I think he's speaking the truth,' Rodrone decided. He turned to the Streall again. 'Do you know science?'

'Yes.'

'We have a faulty space drive. If you can put it in order we will visit the Contemplation World, as you suggest. That is, if Captain Shone agrees.'

Shone looked doubtful. 'Well, if you say so . . .'

The Streall rose. 'It is better for the Lens to be on a Streall world than to be lost in space. Show me your drive.'

t h r e e

The Battle of Minds

THE STREALL SPENT something less than an hour in repairing the *Stator's* propulsion unit. Half a day later, they hovered above the Contemplation World.

The Contemplation World was a desolation, a planet covered in red rust. A tiny blue sun glittered in the sky, giving the atmosphere an icy appearance and reflecting off the scattered lakes in the southern hemisphere.

The *Stator* sank down under the Streall's direction. The creature had already artlessly explained that only one Streall lived there—that was the usual case with Contemplation Worlds. The philosopher dwelt in underground chambers devoting himself to philosophy and science.

Before they landed Rodrone put in one last call on the *Stator's* long distance transceiver. They were near enough to Ptelter for communication now, and he had already summoned the squadron to his help.

The red-haired visage of his lieutenant, Kulthol, looked blandly from the screen.

'We'll be there before you're ready to leave, chief. Depend on us.'

The image faded. Kulthol was not sentimental and did not indulge in long conversations.

The *Stator* crunched into the surface of the planet, sinking a foot into the red rust on landing. Led by the alien, Rodrone stepped out into the thin air, bringing only Shone to help him carry the Lens. They walked for about a hundred yards before the Streall stopped.

A mound grumbled up from the ground, russet particles tumbling from its sides. An opening gaped, slanting down, and the Streall set off into it. The men followed.

It was dark at first, but as they proceeded a gentle glow drifted up in quiet shades of green and orange. A warmth of air came to meet them, bearing the essence of delicate perfumes.

The philosopher's apartments were extensive and varied. Some were lavish, panelled in deep-coloured woods and rich in furs and tapestries. Some were bare metal, not unlike the interior of the *Stator*. They were silent, except for the almost imperceptible hissing of a burning perfume stick in a translucent blue holder, and at first they seemed to be deserted.

Then someone came to meet them. But it was not the philosopher.

It was a human woman. She was tall, and dressed in a loose flowing gown. She hurried up to Rodrone, reaching out her hand to touch his cheek.

He drew back when he saw the expression of her face : melancholy, lost, beyond the frail pale of sanity. But instantly he had done so, he felt sorry. There was a grace about her that was irresistible.

'Who are you?' he asked in a shocked tone.

'Sana.' Her tone was mournful. She inclined her head and reached out with her foot to stroke the carpet. 'I was

a singer once. A famous singer on Gurtlede. Now I exist for the pleasure of a Streall thinker . . .”

‘How long have you been here?’

‘Years . . .’

A door opened behind her. The Streall philosopher entered.

Rodrone heard a humming interchange, full of overtones some of which were beyond audibility, between the two Streall. The philosopher glided forward.

He was a dignified being. His skin was wrinkled with age, and the lustre of his eyes had faded to a faint sky-blue. He looked first at the Lens, and then at Rodrone.

‘So the great plan returns after three thousand years, as it must.’

Rodrone paused before answering. ‘So I was right. This is a plan of the hub.’

‘More than that. I understand you take it to be a *map*, a copy in miniature. It is not. *It is the original design.*’

Rodrone found himself staring at the Lens with its ever-present picture show. His voice would not reply.

‘From this schematic,’ the alien continued in a gruff tone, ‘the stars of Thiswirl were formed.’

‘I don’t believe that. The galaxy evolved from a condensation of hydrogen gas.’

‘So we believe.’

‘Then what part could the Lens play in it?’

‘We do not know. If a saturated solution is seeded with a small crystal, crystals will grow throughout the solution. A tiny seed can gather material and make a huge plant out of it. That is the only suggestion we can make.’

The creature paused. ‘There is an alternative . . . theory . . . that the Lens controls not the formation of stars, but only living things spawned on planets. They are like energy boiling off the surfaces of electrons. And indeed, as we know, there is a difference between galaxies where life is present and where it is not.’

‘So that might be the purpose of the intelligences who made the Lens?’

‘Yes, but it is a four-dimensional plan, and it has an element of uncertainty in it. The Lens can be a control, if you know how to use it, and at certain points in history that

control has to be exercised. This constitutes a feedback safety mechanism between the Lens and Thiswirl itself, ensuring that history goes according to plan. Certain races are entrusted with the task of exercising this control.'

The philosopher's voice rose in volume. 'The Streall are such a race ! But the Lens was lost, three thousand years ago, at the time when special care had to be taken. The result has been disastrous.'

Silence descended for nearly half a minute before the Streall spoke again. 'There should be no men in the hub. Men are a cancer. You should not have become space-creatures. You were only an atom of the galactic drama, to be played on the stage of a single planet and vanish in a little time. Instead, men have become a horror of multiplication, like electrons streaming away from a heavy atom which is constantly replenished, creating new electrons where none should be.'

'That may be bad fortune for some, but it is good fortune for us.'

'It is bad fortune for everybody. There is in your lives none of the orderliness which the proper function of the Lens brings to planetary creatures. You are a horror of chaos and disorder. With you, anything can happen. Now, we shall be able to rectify the fault at the right point, and wipe out your past. Humanity will have thrived hardily, and fallen into decay, without ever reaching beyond the atmosphere of the home planet.'

'But the Lens is not yours. And I want things to go on as they are.'

'It will end in dissolution and disaster !'

Rodrone laughed.

The Streall shuffled forward. 'I have often dreamed of such a thing—' he murmured. He bent, staring intently.

Rodrone joined him. A strange sense of distance came over him, which he did not at first comprehend. After a few seconds, he understood.

The philosopher, impatient to taste the Lens's secrets, was using his knowledge to enter it. He had created an opening—and Rodrone was sucked in alongside the alien.

He was hanging in space, yet it was not space as he knew it. It was atomic space, where energies hum and flash with

an urgency not known in the slow-moving macrocosm. Although there was no sound, he heard things with his mind as well as saw things—in fact he had no body. He heard a huge grinding noise, which his instinct told him to be the change in quantic states of sub-atomic particles. Then he penetrated further into the great swirl of the atomic galaxy, extending his mind into the atoms themselves.

Worlds existed within those atoms. They were not the same as planets, there was nothing corresponding to that spatial phenomenon, but they were analogous. And in those worlds, analogy creatures lived.

He recognised that these creatures were identical to the creatures of the macro-galaxy, in that there was a one-to-one relationship. He could not understand how the relationship was maintained, or how the one remained always identical to the other—but what, after all, was cause and effect? Physics had already proved that they didn't exist.

With a thrill, he realised that this was the world of possible change. This was the meaning of indeterminacy. There was a hint of split paths, as a result of which mutually contradictory events existed simultaneously.

That was the point of contention. In the macrocosm, only one out of all possibilities could become actual. The makers of the Lens had carefully prepared their drama, and written the script of galactic history, but they had been unable to eradicate indeterminacy from the atomic world. Thus they were faulted by the nature of things.

This swirl, Rodrone saw, was becoming the rogue galaxy, splitting up into its own fragmentary playlets as the cancerous energies of man radiated through the hub. And this was what he wanted! In that disorganised hub, nearly everything that could happen did happen somewhere. So what if some of it was bizarre? He thought of the deadliners . . . but even so, it pleased him more than the vast, orderly system which the Streall wished to institute at the behest of the makers of the Lens.

The Streall intended to make an alteration in the past, forming a mirror-barrier around an electron which somehow had become too energetic, and so preventing the spread of man. Such an operation as that was far beyond Rodrone's mind. But he could exert his influence in a tiny way. All

that was necessary was that two particular energy-systems should resonate in a particular way . . . and the result in the macro-galaxy would be colossal war.

He felt the Streall philosopher's mind ranging alongside with his. When he tried to make the interference, the Streall knew it and moved his own powers in to block him. A tussle took place, each trying to confine the fight to each other and not spill energy which might detonate suns. For some time they alternated, kicking each other up and down the scale of discrete energy states.

The philosopher's mind was the stronger.

But because he was a philosopher, and had lived in solitude for so long, he had become detached from physical things. Unlike Rodrone, it never occurred to him to transfer part of his attention to his body which existed in the macrocosm. He hardly knew it when Rodrone burned him down with his handgun.

Rodrone lingered for but a second to phase the two frequencies which he had noted. Then he withdrew to the apartments.

The remaining Streall had fired at Rodrone with a silver slab which now lay on the floor, its pale beam still emitting. Captain Gael Shone had stepped in to take the shot in the stomach, and had then destroyed the Streall with his own handgun.

Sana had pressed herself against the wall, wide-eyed, holding her dress at her bosom. Rodrone spared her a compassionate glance, then knelt to the captain.

'Shone,' he said sadly, 'I'm sorry to see you die like this.'

Shone grinned. 'Don't offer me any hope, will you?'

'I'm sorry,' Rodrone said gently. 'But there it is. You're going to die.'

'I know. But I don't care . . .'

Captain Shone struggled as if to raise his head, then lay back, resigned. He seemed to be looking a long way off.

'I don't mind dying,' he told Rodrone. 'Listen : I've seen everything. I've seen worlds even you've never heard of. I've been off into deep space, nearly two galactic diameters out, and seen Andromeda on one side and Thiswirl on the other. 'What a sight ! Ever since I saw that, I've been ready to die . . .'

He had seemed to speak without too much effort, but it must have been show. His head dropped to one side.

Rodrone stood up. 'You'd better come with me, Sana.'

She shook her head. 'I live here now.'

'But you don't have to stay here.' Rodrone looked at her, seeing the lissom allure of her body. He realised that it was a long time since he had looked at a woman in that way.

She merely pulled back her head with a willowy, graceful movement, and stroked her hair wistfully into place over her shoulders.

He started to argue with her, but suddenly he hadn't the heart. When he left she was still there, singing as she had been wont to do for the Streall philosopher.

Sana's slow, sad song curled like an eddying vapour through the silent, heavy chambers. It was like something eternal, finding its melancholy repose in that hard place, as if it would lay there forever.

Rodrone took one long last look at her slight form. He did not know if she realised he was watching her, but if so, she was completely unpretentious about it. His eyes lingering, he slipped through the door.

She had stirred desire in his blood, reminding him that he had a wife on Sunder. Five years was a long time without a woman.

He made his way back to the ship, walking past the crewmen without speaking and climbing into the control gallery.

Pim found him there ten minutes later in a deep reverie.

'What now?' Pim interrupted rudely.

Rodrone looked up. 'What?'

'The Captain didn't come back. We've decided to make you Captain. The men want to know where we head for now.'

'Sunder,' Rodrone told him, coming to life and searching the desk for charts. 'I'm going to see my wife.'

They headed into intersystem space, where the squadron led by Kulthol was rapidly approaching. The *Stator* moved steadily towards the rendezvous while Rodrone, aided by Feeldonet, calculated a course to Land. He looked eagerly forward to meeting his wife now.

They met his own squadron, and a sizeable Streall fleet, at almost the same time. As Rodrone saw the angular ships speed into view on the detector screen he felt a cold but

thrilling shudder pass down his spine.

There was nothing to do but fight. The battle which took place lasted four hours and ended with the near-destruction of the Streall fleet and the total destruction of Rodrone's squadron.

The *Stator* managed to slip away in the last minutes. Before he could be tracked down by the remnants of the enemy, Rodrone ordered the ship to continue on to Sunder.

As they journeyed, he monitored by means of the long-distance transceiver various calls that were spanning the stars. Such a number of these expensive transmissions was unusual—but they all had one theme.

Rodrone's war was in progress. Probably it had been established by the battle from which he had just escaped. But in any case, from one end of inhabited space to the other Man and Streall were hurled together in savage conflict.

It was a big war. But now man would never be intimidated.

A few weeks later they pulled into the Land system. Rodrone's joy increased as he saw that gentle violet sun, and found the traceries of eleven planets on the miraculous picture-plate behind the desk console. On the fourth of those traces, he thought to himself, his wife lived.

Then he knew that something was wrong when they penetrated deeper into the system. The seventh planet was *smoking*. Lurid streams of poisonous vapour rolled out from the planet as it moved in its orbit, the deadly pyre of what had once been a fair world with fifty million inhabitants.

The sixth and fifth worlds he gave only a brief inspection which brought his anxiety to a state of certainty. He moved on to Sunder itself almost as a matter of formality.

Jebby was with him in the control gallery when they edged close to the planet and Rodrone was able to see it for himself. The Streall had come and gone, blasting the Land system to Hell. Sunder was ravaged, blackened, practically ripped apart and scorched down to the very rock mantle. It was inconceivable that even a bacterium could still be alive down there.

Jebby looked at the sight, and grinned. 'Another dead 'un, eh, Captain?'

Rodrone nodded absently. He could hardly expect a deadliner to grieve over either death or parting.

One month later, Rodrone was watching an atomic explosion from a safe distance on his viewing screen.

In the dead centre of the explosion was the Lens. When the explosion was over and some of the cloud had cleared away, instruments told him that it was still there.

On its recovery, the lens proved to be unharmed.

Rodrone sighed. He had tried every way to destroy it, but it was indestructible.

One other method lay open to him. He could fling it into a sun. Prolongued exposure to a nuclear furnace might do the trick. But he was afraid to try this. He had a fear that inside a star the Lens might interact so violently with the fierce and immense energies that tore it apart as to change the nature of the star altogether, and thereby eventually influence the galaxy as a whole.

Sitting at the desk console he pondered this, but he could not decide what to do. A month of futile attempts had exhausted him. He felt quite empty, drained of any real interest in life.

He had never fully realised just how much he depended on the existence of his wife.

Jebby came into the gallery. 'When're we gonna go?' he asked in his flat accent.

'Go where?' Rodrone asked.

Jebby moved his shoulders uneasily. 'We've been hangin' around for a month. The boys wanna know where we're going.'

Of course, Rodrone thought. He had failed to understand. These deadliners, whose lives were one long monotony, felt restless if they were not on the move.

Suddenly he smiled. He had remembered Gael Shone's dying words, and he knew what he would do. He could not destroy the Lens, but he could lose it where it would never be found again.

The time-dilation would remove him from this time by hundreds of years, but it would be well worth it. The *Stator* would head out into Deep Space, from where he could see Andromeda on one side and Thiswirl on the other.

Barrington J Bayley

BOOKS

MYTH MAKER OF THE 20th CENTURY

by J G Ballard

TRUE GENIUS AND first mythographer of the mid-20th century, William Burroughs is the lineal successor to James Joyce, to whom he bears more than a passing resemblance—exile, publication in Paris, undeserved notoriety as a pornographer, and an absolute dedication to The Word—the last characteristic alone sufficient to guarantee the hostility and incomprehension of the English reviewers. Burroughs' originality, his 'difficulty' as a writer, resides largely in the fact that he is a *writer*, systematically creating the verbal myths of the mid-century at a time when the oral novel, or un-illustrated cartoon, holds almost exclusive sway. In their range, complexity, comic richness and invention his three novels, *The Naked Lunch*, *The Soft Machine* and *The Ticket that Exploded*, re-worked to form the basis of *Dead Fingers Talk* (Calder, 25s.), display a degree of virtuosity and literary power that places Burroughs on a par with the authors of *Finnegans Wake* and *The Metamorphosis*.

In *Finnegans Wake*, a gigantic glutinous pun, Joyce in effect brought the novel up to date, circa 1940, with his vast cyclical dream-rebus of a Dublin publican who is simultaneously Adam, Napoleon and the heroes of a thousand mythologies. Burroughs takes up from here, and his three novels are the first definite portrait of the inner landscape of our mid-century, using its own language and manipulative techniques, its own fantasies and nightmares, those of

Followers of obsolete unthinkable trades doodling in Etruscan, addicts of drugs not yet synthesised, investigators of infractions denounced by bland paranoid chess players, officials of unconstituted police states, brokers of exquisite dreams . . .

The landscapes are those of the exurban man-made wilderness :

swamps and garbage heaps, alligators crawling around in broken bottles and tin cans, neon arabesques of motels, marooned pimps scream obscenities at passing cars from islands of rubbish.

The almost complete inability of the English critics to understand Burroughs is as much a social failure as a literary one, a refusal to recognise the materials of the present decade as acceptable for literary purposes until a lapse of a generation or so has given to a few brand names an appropriately discreet nostalgia. One result is the detachment of the English social novel from everyday life to a point where it is fast becoming a minor genre as unrelated to common experience as the country house detective story (by contrast, the great merit of science fiction has been its ability to assimilate rapidly the materials of the immediate present and future, although it is now failing in precisely those areas where the future has already become the past).

Whatever his reservations about some aspects of the mid-20th century, Burroughs accepts that it can be fully described only in terms of its own language, its own idioms and verbal lore. Dozens of different argots are now in common currency ; most people speak at least three or four separate languages, and a verbal relativity exists as important as any of time and space. To use the stylistic conventions of the traditional oral novel—the sequential narrative, characters ‘in the round,’ consecutive events, balloons of dialogue attached to ‘he said’ and ‘she said’—is to perpetuate a set of conventions ideally suited to a period of great tales of adventure in the Conradian mode, or to an over-formalised Jamesian society, but now valuable for little more than the bed-time story and the fable. To use these conventions to describe events in the present

decade is to write a kind of historical novel in reverse, and it is interesting to see that the most original social novelists have already dropped these conventions. Kingsley Amis's brilliant novel *One Fat Englishman* is not merely a cyclical work of immense subtlety which can be begun at any point—its portrait of the central character is so fully realised and developed his progress so non-linear, that the pages of the book could be detached and shuffled.

Burroughs begins by accepting the full implications of his subject matter :

Well these are the simple facts of the case—
There were at least two parasites one sexual the
other cerebral working together the way parasites
will— And why has no one ever asked 'What
is word?' — Why do you talk to yourself all
the time ?

Operation Rewrite, Burroughs' own function as a writer, a role recognised by the narrative (there is no pretence that the book has some kind of independent existence), defines the subject matter of *The Ticket that Exploded* :

The Venusian invasion was known as 'Operation
Other Half,' that is a parasitic invasion of the
sexual area taking advantage, as all invasion plans
must, of an already existing mucked up situ-
ation— The human organism is literally consist-
ing of two halves from the beginning, word and
all human sex is this unsanitary arrangement
whereby two entities attempt to occupy the
same three-dimensional coordinate points giving
rise to the sordid latrine brawls which have
characterised a planet based on 'The Word' . . .

Far from being an arbitrary stunt, Burroughs' cut-in method is thus seen as the most appropriate technique for this marriage of opposites, as well as underlining the role of recurrent images in all communication, fixed at the points of contact in the webs of language linking everything in our lives, from nostalgic reveries of 'invisible passenger took my hands in dawn sleep of water, music— Broken towers intersect cigarette smoke memory of each other' to sinister bureaucratic memos and medicalesse. Many of the portmanteau images in the book make no sense

unless seen in terms of this merging of opposites, e.g. the composite character known as Mr Bradly Mr Martin, and a phrase such as 'rectums merging' which shocked the reviewer in THE LONDON MAGAZINE to ask 'how?'—obviously the poor woman hadn't the faintest idea what the book was about.

The characters who appear in the narrative may be externalised in 'three-dimensional terms,' as Burroughs puts it, but only so long as they suit the purposes of the subject matter. The 'reality' of the books is not some pallid reflection of a hypothetical external scene, its details and local colour stitched into the narrative like poker-work, but the self-created verbal reality of the next sentence and paragraph, like a track-laying train free to move about in all directions on a single set of rails.

In turn, Burroughs' three novels are a comprehensive vision of the individual imagination's relationship to society at large (*The Naked Lunch*), to sex (*The Soft Machine*), and to time and space (*The Ticket that Exploded*).

In *The Naked Lunch* (i.e., the addict's fix), Burroughs compares organised society with that of its most extreme opposite, the invisible society of drug addicts. His implicit conclusion is that the two are not very different, certainly at the points where they make the closest contact—in prisons and psychiatric institutions. His police are all criminals and perverts, while his doctors, like the egregious Dr. Benway of Islam Inc., are sadistic psychopaths whose main intention is to maim and disfigure their patients. Most of them, of course, are not aware of this, and their stated intentions may be the very opposite. Benway, a manipulator and co-ordinator of symbol systems, whose assignment in Annexia is T.D.—Total Demoralisation—makes it his first task to abolish concentration camps, mass arrest, and 'except under certain limited and special circumstances' the use of torture. When out of a job he keeps himself going by performing cut-rate abortions in subway toilets, 'operating with one hand, beating the rats offa my patients with the other.' Likeable and insouciant, Benway is full of ingenious ideas for uncovering the spies who infest every nook and cranny :

‘ An agent is trained to deny his agent identity by asserting his cover story. So why not use psychic jiu-jitsu and go along with him ? Suggest that his cover story is his identity and that he has no other. His agent identity becomes unconscious, that is, out of control . . . ’

However, questions of identity are highly relativistic. As one spy laments : ‘ So I am a public agent and don’t know who I work for, get my instructions from street signs, newspapers and pieces of conversation . . . ’

By contrast, the addicts form a fragmentary, hunted sect, only asking to be left alone and haunted by their visions of subway dawns, cheap hotels, empty amusement parks and friends who have committed suicide. ‘ The fact of addiction imposes contact,’ but in their relationships with one another they at least take no moral stand, and their illusions and ambitions are directed only at themselves. But for its continued comic richness—for much of the way it reads like the Lenny Bruce show re-written by Dr. Goebbels—*The Naked Lunch* would be a profoundly pessimistic book, for Burroughs’ conclusion is that the war between society and individual freedom, a freedom that consists simply of being *individual*, can never end, and that ultimately the only choice is between living in one’s own nightmares or in other peoples, for those who gain control of the system, like Benway and the Nazi creators of the death camps, merely impose their own fantasies on everyone else.

In *The Soft Machine* (the title is an explicit description of the sexual apparatus) Burroughs carries out a vast exploration of the nature of the sexual act, whose magic revivifies everything it touches. In this strange, hallucinatory world everything is translated into sexual terms, and the time is one when ‘ everybody was raising some kinda awful life form in his bidet to fight the Sex Enemy.’

What appear to be the science fictional elements in *The Soft Machine*, and to a greater extent in *The Ticket that Exploded*—there are Nova Police, and characters such as the Fluoroscopic Kid, the Subliminal Kid, the delightful Johnny Yen, errand boy from the death trauma, heavy metal addicts, Green boy-girls from the terminal sewers of Venus—in fact play a metaphorical role and are not intended

to represent 'three-dimensional' figures. These self-satirising figments are part of the casual vocabulary of the space age, shared by all people born after the year 1920, just as Mata Hari, the Mons Angel, and the dirty men's urinal to the north of Waterloo form part of the semi-comical vocabulary of an older generation. In so far as *The Ticket* . . . is a work of science fiction, it is on a far more serious level. The exploding ticket, i.e., the individual identity in extension through time and space, provides Burroughs with an endless source of brilliant images, of which 'the photo flakes falling' is the most moving in the book—moments of spent time, each bearing an image of some experience, drifting down like snow on all our memories and lost hopes. The sad poetry of the concluding chapter of *The Ticket* . . . , as the whole apocalyptic landscape of Burroughs' world closes in upon itself, now and then flaring briefly like a dying volcano, is on par with Anna Livia Plurabelle's requiem for her river-husband in *Finnegans Wake*.

And zero time to the sick tracks— A long time
between suns I held the stale overcoat— Sliding
between light and shadow— Cross the wounded
galaxies we intersect, poison of dead sun in your
brain slowly fading— Migrants of ape in gasoline
crack of history, explosive bio-advance out of space
to neon . . . Pass without doing our ticket—
Mountain wind of Saturn in the morning sky—
From the death trauma weary goodbye then.

For science fiction the lesson of Burroughs' work is plain. It is now nearly forty years since the first Buck Rogers comic strip, and only two less than a century since the birth of science fiction's greatest modern practitioner, H. G. Wells, yet the genre is still dominated by largely the same set of conventions, the same repertory of ideas, and, worst of all, by the assumption that it is still possible to write accounts of interplanetary voyages in which the appeal is to realism rather than to fantasy (what one could call Campbell's Folly). Once it gets 'off the ground' into space all science fiction is fantasy, and the more serious it tries to be, the more naturalistic, the greater its failure, as it

completely lacks the moral authority and conviction of a literature won from experience.

Burroughs also illustrates that the whole of science fiction's imaginary universe has long since been absorbed into the general consciousness, and that most of its ideas are now valid only in a kind of marginal spoofing. Indeed, I seriously doubt whether science fiction is any longer the most important source of new ideas in the very medium it originally created. The main task facing science fiction writers now is to create a new set of conventions. Burroughs methods of exploring time and space, for example, of creating their literary equivalents, are an object lesson.

However, Burroughs' contribution to science fiction is only a minor aspect of his achievement. In his trilogy, William Burroughs has fashioned from our dreams and nightmares the first authentic mythology of the age of Cape Canaveral, Hiroshima and Belsen. His novels are the terminal documents of the mid-20th century, scabrous and scarifying, a progress report from an inmate in the cosmic madhouse.

William Burroughs,

I'm with you in Rockland

*where we wake up electrified out of the coma by
our own soul's airplanes*

I'm with you in Rockland

*in my dreams you walk dripping from a sea-
journey on the highway across America in tears
to the door of my cottage in the Western night*

—J G Ballard

PUBLISHERS ARE REQUESTED TO SEND BOOKS
FOR REVIEW AS EARLY AS POSSIBLE TO :

The Editor, NEW WORLDS SF, 17, Lake House,
Scovell Road, London, S.E.1.

LETTERS

All correspondence to The Editor, New Worlds SF, 17 Lake House, Scovell Road, London, S.E.1.

TANGIBLE HAPPINESS

Dear Sir,

Many thanks indeed for the information on **NEW WORLDS** and **SCIENCE FANTASY** which is good news indeed. Quite apart from reasons of sheer nostalgia for these magazines, keeping them going is of prime importance to the whole genre. It can do nothing but good to have as many markets as possible for the writer. It has been stated that an over-abundance of markets lowers the overall standard of the field, of course, but that is hardly the point here, I'm sure you'll agree. We have been on the brink of going to quite the opposite extreme and the reprieve is almost producing tangible happiness in this quarter. It will in other areas too, I feel sure.

R. M. Bennett, Editor, SKYRACK, 17 Newcastle Road, Wavertree, Liverpool 15.

NEW SENSE OF WONDER

Dear Sir,

Congratulations on keeping the magazines going. Only one thing—how about forgetting this 'old Sense of Wonder' everyone's moaning about losing? Modern stories are better than old ones—let's have, for God's sake, more of the *new* Sense of Wonder beginning to emerge in your magazine and elsewhere!

R. Lumley, Didmarton, Glos.

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